THIS SIDE OF MIDNIGHT:
RECOVERING A QUEER POLITICS OF DISCO CLUB CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

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Academic scholarship traditionally approached disco by establishing its cultural relevance through a mainstream/underground binary that automatically mapped onto connections to LGBT identity politics. Often, these studies failed to adequately explore the embodied experiences of disco dancers within the club environment, focusing instead on textual analyses of music, linear histories of disco’s development, or the perspectives of disc-jockeys (DJs) and club owners on disco experience. By exploring the ways in which this binary is constructed, this project argued that both the mainstream/underground binary and the reliance on LGBT identity politics missed the important subcultural elements that constructed unique cultural institutions within urban spaces. These subcultural elements were the relationships between the dancers, the DJ, and the club atmosphere/space. This project applied a secondary textual analysis approach, inspired by phenomenological methodology, to a collection of memories of dancers at the Paradise Garage in order to point towards the important experiential aspects that defined dancing within this specific club, identifying three themes as central to dancer’s experience of the Paradise Garage: entering and arriving at the Paradise Garage; dancing and atmosphere; and community. Throughout these three themes, a fourth theme emerged as important to the dancers’ experiences: escapism/transcendence. From this point, this project synthesized a variety of theoretical texts in order to point towards a potential queer politics embedded within the experience of dancing at a disco club, drawing on the contradictions inherent to hypermodernity, queer constructions of time, and the liberatory potential of affective escapism.
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INTRODUCTION

Paar-ty! Paar-ty! You hear the chant at concerts, rising like a tribal rallying cry on a shrill wave of whistles and hard-beaten tambourines. It’s at one a call to get down and party, a statement that there’s a party going on and an indication that discotheques, where the chant originated, are back in force after their virtual disappearance with the flashbulb pop of the Sixties. Actually, discotheques never died; they just went back underground where the hardcore dance crowd—blacks, Latins, gays—was. But in the last year, they’ve returned, not only as a rapidly spreading social phenomenon (via juice bars, after hours clubs, private lofts open on weekends to members only, floating groups of party-givers who take over the ballrooms of old hotels from midnight to dawn), but as a strong influence on the music people listen to and buy. (Aletti, [1973] 2009, p. 5)

This selection, from the first piece published in the *Rolling Stone* about disco music, captures one of the most difficult aspects of studying disco: even though we think of it as a genre of music tied to the club culture of the 1970s, disco was much more than music. First, as Aletti (2009) points out, the disco culture of the 1970s had ties to the mod discotheque culture of the 1960s. Second, the music of disco was intimately tied to the social and cultural practices which enabled it to be heard. As Aletti’s column in *Record World* would later demonstrate, what type of disco music was heard depended almost completely upon the individual’s club of choice. Yet, even these two points only approach the vast complexity of disco. Tim Lawrence (2006) defined disco as:

The overburdened name given to the culture that includes the spaces (discotheques) that were organized around the playback of recorded music by a DJ (disc jockey); the social practice of individual freeform dancing that was established within this context; and the
music genre that crystallised within this social setting between 1970 and 1979.

(Lawrence, 2006, p. 128)

By focusing on the three function elements of disco culture (venues, dancing, and musical genre) without taking recourse to aesthetic and ideological distinctions, Lawrence (2006) provides a definition of disco that provides firm boundaries for thinking about pre-disco and post-disco dance culture. Yet, these boundaries are not without their own problems. The dance club venues popularized within 1970s disco culture were the prototype for contemporary dance clubs; based solely on this aspect, disco clubs continue to exist in the contemporary moment. The phenomena of “individual freeform dancing” (Lawrence, 2006, p. 128) emerged initially with the Twist dance craze in the early 1960s (Buckland, 2002, p. xii); thus, Lawrence’s (2006) description of dancing can be read primarily as the styles and crazes unique to the 1970s (e.g. the Hustle).

Finally, Lawrence’s construction of disco music as a single genre limited to the period between 1970 and 1979 masks the musical diversity that gave disco a complex sound, even if that sound did not always emerge from the clubs into the public spaces of mainstream culture. The most interesting part of this definition, however, is Lawrence’s (2006) assertion that disco is an overburdened signifier. This position is thematically mirrored in his earlier work, *Love saves the day*; here, Lawrence (2003) destabilized the use of the signifier ‘disco’ and replaced it with the phrase ‘dance culture’. This destabilization reflected a shift in focus from disco’s discursive construction to disco’s functional aspects: Lawrence’s (2003, p. xiv) description of his project is of constructing “an integrated, chronological audio biography” in order to rescue the dance culture of the 1970s from the weight of disco-discourse.

One source of this discursive weight can be found in disco’s much proclaimed death. By June, 1979, discophobia had emerged into the American mainstream from two locations. First, as
part of the prelude to the 1980 U.S. presidential election, the evangelical right grouped disco among a variety of other social ‘ills’. For example, in the spring of 1979, infamous televangelist Jerry Falwell denounced “President Carter, homosexuality, pornography, television comedies, abortion, discos, divorce, and sex education” (Echols, 2010, p. 205) with equal aplomb. Second, radio disc jockeys “employed by classic rock or album-oriented rock (AOR) stations” (Echols, 2010, p. 205) organized and lead anti-disco movements that often culminated in violent acts of destruction. The most famous example of anti-disco destruction is Steve Dahl’s Disco Demolition Night, in which Dahl blew up a box containing 50,000 disco records during a Chicago White Sox double header and began a riot (Echols, 2010, p. 206). In both of these cases, disco culture was symbolic of the degradation of American society. As Lawrence (2006) argued, the anti-disco backlash …tapped into the homophobic and racist sentiments that underpinned the rise of the Anglo-American New Right and would culminate in the election of Ronald Regan [sic] and Margaret Thatcher… Gay men, however, weren’t the sole focus of the anti-disco movement’s rage. Almost as target-friendly were the equality-demanding women and African Americans who had become intertwined with disco and, much to the displeasure of the New Right’s core following, were displacing white straight men from the centre of American popular music. (Lawrence, 2006, p. 131)

Within a year of Dahl’s demolition and Falwell’s sermon, radio stations moved away from the disco format and “major record labels dumped their disco divisions” (Echols, 2010, p. 209). Disco, for all intents and purposes, had been killed with the change in decade.

The causal relationship between the New Right and the anti-disco rock fans has become canonical in disco scholarship. And while it is convenient to focus solely on the collusion of the
New Right and rock fans, Echols (2010) argued that disco had become “a dependable lightning rod…for Americans’ multiple discontents” (p. 212) by the end of the 1970s. Often, these discontents emerged through overlapping, often contradictory, vectors. For example, Dahl shared aesthetic judgments of disco with Andrew Holleran, disco dancer and gay novelist: both lamented late disco’s monotony and shallowness, albeit for different reasons (Echols, 2010, p.212-3). Similarly, both the Left and Right found disco reprehensible through its relationship to the 1960s. For Leftist politics,

disco was the final nail in the coffin of the sixties—all the proof needed that commodification had transformed pop music from a site of counter-culture rebellion into triviality and acquiescence… For the right, disco represented not political quiescence but rather the continuation of the sixties’ hedonism and all-around depravity. (Echols, 2010, p. 213)

Underneath this aesthetic and political turmoil lurked the radio industry, which orchestrated parts of the anti-disco backlash. Lee Abrams and Kent Burkhart, two radio consultants involved in the development of AOR stations across the United States, “had a hunch that the backlash against disco might prove as lucrative as disco itself” (Echols, 2010, p. 207). Abrams and Burkhart had not only “advised disco stations to switch formats,” but also “counseled all their clients to campaign against disco” (Echols, 2010, p. 207). Abrams and Burkhart’s advice was, in part, based on John Parikhal’s “attitudinal research on discophobia” (Echols, 2010, p. 208), which showed that “most people… were fairly neutral about the genre until one or two disco haters began ranting, at which point the group would turn decisively anti-disco” (p. 208). By 1980, disco was not only dead and over; it was also constructed as abject within the music industry.
This thesis is an attempt to recover the queer politics of disco’s subcultural practices. I use the term ‘subcultural practices’ as an intentional move away from the dominant discussion of disco’s ‘underground’; within narratives of popular music, and especially within disco, ‘underground’ is a loaded signifier. In many disco histories and criticisms, the ‘underground’ has been constructed as a political move to avoid “the usual depictions of disco as narcissistic and politically retrograde” (Echols, 2010, p. 155). The ‘disco underground’, in this sense, points towards two binary oppositions that structure disco’s subversive tendencies and political potential. First, disco’s ‘underground’ is often constructed as in opposition to the capitalist appropriation of disco culture that launched it firmly into the American mainstream. Second, disco’s ‘underground’ is almost exclusively explored in terms of the subversive potentials of gay men’s identity: disco’s subversive tendencies, in this sense, are linked explicitly to an established ‘gay’ identity. As Echols (2010) described the intersection of these binaries,

Yes, they argue, there was glitz and greed and tackiness in *mainstream* disco, but here in the gay/queer underground one finds disco’s authentic self in all its noirish and subversive glory. Even Tim Lawrence and Peter Shapiro, who have written such supple and discerning chronicles of seventies dance music, find themselves adopting a two-tier schema of “good” gay disco versus “bad” mainstream disco. (Echols, 2010, p. 155)

The form of this two-tier schema is historically determined and discursively constructed: both Lawrence (2003) and Shapiro (2005) wrote from a vantage point that constructs disco as the vital connection between the Stonewall Riots in 1969 and the rise of the AIDS Pandemic in the 1970s in the formation of LGBT/queer political identities. From this perspective, the connection of disco to LGBT cultural practices and political identities is assumed from the beginning, rather than treated as a phenomenon that needs to be investigated.
But both Lawrence (2003) and Shapiro (2005) also participated in a second strand of academic discourse that serves to construct disco solely in terms of resistance to capitalism and the formation of gay men’s identities as politically subversive. I am specifically referring to the first scholarly criticism of disco culture, Richard Dyer’s (1979) “In defence of disco.” In this short piece, originally published in *Gay left*, Dyer (1979) argued that subversive tendencies can only be seen in disco to the extent that disco culture was a strategy of appropriation:

The anarchy of capitalism throws up commodities that an oppressed group can take up and use to cobble together its own culture. In this respect, disco is very much like another profoundly ambiguous aspect of male gay culture, camp. It is a ‘contrary’ use of what the dominant culture provides, it is important in forming a gay identity, and it has subversive potential as well as reactionary implications. (Dyer, 1979, p. 21)

By limiting disco’s subversive potential solely to its intersections with the formation of gay men’s subject position as an oppressed class, Dyer’s (1979) analysis replicates the relationships of power that serve to discipline sexuality within Western societies. In other words, Dyer’s (1979) analysis replicated the relationships of power that serve to transform sexuality into a discourse of Truth about the subject

[as] if it were essential for us to be able to draw from that little piece of ourselves not only pleasure but knowledge, and a whole subtle interchange from one to the other: a knowledge of pleasure, a pleasure that comes of knowing pleasure, a knowledge-pleasure… Between each of us and our sex, the West has placed a never-ending demand for truth: it is up to us to extract the truth of sex, since this truth is beyond its grasp; it is up to sex to tell us our truth, since sex is what holds it in darkness. (Foucault, 1990a, p. 77).
The primary intervention made in this thesis project operates on two levels. First, I divorce ‘queerness’ from LGBT identities: while LGBT identifying subjects have an outsider-within perspective in relation to the structures of heteronormativity, using the term ‘queer’ as an umbrella term for these identities privileges the disciplinary power through which these subject positions have been constructed. Furthermore, locating queerness solely within LGBT identifying subjects ignores that heteronormativity and heterosexuality are not equivalent terms: heteronormativity is the process through which society attempts to construct an “impossible object” by attempting to “affix itself, intelligibly and positively, as a discourse purified of surplus/excess” (Erni, 1996, p. 572). In this sense, “it is the homo inside the hetero, not the hetero as such, that is capable of granting the heterosexualized social order its very order, and of dismantling it” (Erni, 1996, p. 572). This dismantling must occur not through the development of the LGBT subject as a distinct other within the social order; doing so only replicates the binaries upon which heteronormativity is based. Instead, the dismantling must include the rejection of the binary oppositions as a whole. This thesis project intervenes in disco scholarship in an effort to begin this process of dismantling: by recovering a queer politics of disco that is not dependent upon LGBT identities, but instead is manifested through the unique spatial, social, and cultural practices enabled by disco’s underground scene that enabled LGBT identities and practices to emerge within, alongside of, and through disco subcultural practices.

In order to accomplish this, I employed a “scavenger methodology” (Halberstam, 1998, p. 13) informed by secondary textual analysis and phenomenological methodology. A scavenger methodology “uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects that have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behavior” (Halberstam, 1998, p. 13). While Halberstam (1998) uses subjects to refer to people/groups of
subjects, I also use it in its more traditional meaning of the topic being discussed. Throughout disco scholarship, little attention is paid to the importance of the embodied experiences of dancers in constructing the social and cultural importance of disco subcultural formations. Some scholars (Hughes, 1994; Lin, 2008; Nyong’o, 2008) rely on a discursive and/or textual approach to understand the impact of disco upon subjects. Others (Dyer, 1979; Kutulas, 2003) rely upon an analysis of musical form, content, and image to examine disco culture. Many (Brewster & Broughton, 2000b; Lawrence, 2006; Shapiro, 2005) couple discussions of the historical development of disco culture with the perspectives of the DJs, club owners, and music industry executives in order to point towards the form of disco culture. And some (Echols, 2010) have a little bit of all of these approaches scattered throughout their texts in order to arrive at an interpretation of disco culture. Yet none of these authors adequately examine the experience of disco dancers in understanding disco culture. This, in part, is because of disco’s nature as a historical subcultural practice: the most dedicated dancers at clubs that operated through subcultural practices were often consuming various narcotics and dancing throughout the night and into the next morning. Many of the experiences of being in a disco club and dancing for hours on end cannot be recovered. Furthermore, many of disco’s central citizens are no longer alive: the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, in particular, took the lives of some of disco’s most dedicated dancers.

Thus, I use an analytical method inspired by phenomenological methodology to gesture towards the experience of dancing at one particular disco club, the Paradise Garage. Phenomenological methodology, drawn from the philosophical work of Husserl and Heidegger, calls for an approach to the subject matter that is as unfettered by commonly held knowledge as possible. This is accomplished through a process called bracketing, in which both the experience
being investigated and the preconceptions about this experience are investigated: the goal is to
move away from the “everyday, ordinary way of perceiving things” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33) in
order to approach a subject from as neutral a position as possible. While I do not engage in an
established phenomenological analysis within this project, I appropriate the concept of
bracketing in order to question and challenge commonly held assumptions about disco’s form,
politics, and social importance. Specifically, I ‘bracket’ the connection between LGBT and gay
men’s identities and disco culture in order to investigate the subversive subcultural practices of
disco without taking the identities of the dancers as given.

In a traditional phenomenological study, bracketing is followed by the reduction of the
primary data down to the essence of the experience by the use of natural meaning units, thematic
indices, and imaginative variation in order to provide as complete a picture as possible of the
experience being investigated. Because I did not have extensive personal accounts, interviews, or
other documents filled with thick descriptions of dancing at the Paradise Garage, it was not
possible to completely bracket the questions under investigation in order to focus solely on the
ways that queer practices emerged within the club itself, nor was it possible to fully follow the
processes of reduction. Instead, I used memories of dancing at the Paradise Garage collected,
primarily, from two secondary sources: the liner notes on The final nights of paradise, a five-part
bootleg album featuring the recording of one of the sets of the last night the club was open; and
interviews featured in Ramos’s (2003) documentary, Maestro, which focuses explicitly upon the
role of the Paradise Garage in New York’s underground dance scene. Both of these sources were
produced by former members of the Garage; thus, at least one level of reduction had already
been performed by someone who had experienced the club space. From this point, I distilled
themes that spoke explicitly to the experience of being in the club and then re-assembled the
primary data around these themes. In order to supplement these memories, I relied on additional sources to provide context for these memories, whether they are related to the unique DJing style of Larry Levan or to the technical specifications of the light and sound systems at the Paradise Garage. Finally, I let my own experiences dancing at night clubs, house parties, and other dance venues guide an interpretation of the data; I also wrote this thesis while listening to recorded sets and mix tapes from the Paradise Garage and other disco clubs as well as multiple playlists containing disco chart toppers, underground hits, and non-disco genre songs that received wide play within the clubs. Specifically for the Paradise Garage, I constantly and repeatedly listened to The final nights of paradise collection to gain a feel for Levan’s DJing techniques and music aesthetics.

Each of the chapters of this thesis reflects a different process of this methodology, as well as a different and specific intervention into disco scholarship. In the first chapter, I look specifically at the underground/mainstream binary in terms of its connection to the commercialization of disco culture and its connections to the development of gay men’s identities. By tracing disco’s commercialization alongside the structures of the music industry in the 1970s, I argue that disco’s move into the mainstream failed to replicate a “middle stratum” (Straw, 2008, p. 871), located in the disco club environment, that was the core of disco’s queer, subversive potential. I then turn to Hebdige’s (2008) discussion of subcultural style in punk culture to argue that disco subcultural practices operate through an elliptical styling dependent upon the club atmosphere, the DJ, and the dancers. Then, by reading gender alongside sexuality, I argue that the construction of disco clubs as sites specifically for gay men served to transform this middle stratum in ways that reinforced patriarchal and white supremacist structures of power.
In the second chapter, I turn to an examination of the Paradise Garage in order to perform an analysis of disco subculture informed by this middle stratum. I situate the Paradise Garage within disco culture by focusing on the DJ genealogy of Larry Levan (the primary DJ and star of the Paradise Garage) and examine some of the ways in which his DJ style created a unique atmosphere within the club. Then, I examine the technical aspects of the Garage, describing the unique sound and light systems. Finally, I analyze the memories of dancers to examine the three central themes of dancing at the Garage which emerged from the reduction of these memories: entering and arriving at the Paradise Garage; dancing and atmosphere; and community. Appearing throughout these three themes is a fourth theme, escapism/transcendence, which provides a partial focus for the third chapter.

In the third chapter, I assemble a potential theoretical architecture that examines disco’s relationship with social and cultural formations from theoretical positions aimed at examining a potential queerness of disco subcultural practices through the Paradise Garage. I begin with a discussion of Lipovetsky’s (2005) concept of hypermodernity and briefly trace it through LGBT identity politics and the Stonewall Riots as well as the development of dancing forms in the 1960s and 1970s. I then connect hypermodernity to Halberstam’s (2005) construction of queer time and Muñoz’s (2009) discussion of queer futurity in order to point towards the queer subcultural practices that could be seen within disco culture. I conclude with a discussion of Foucault’s (1990) concepts of the *scientia sexualis* and the *ars erotica* to give further clarity to queer futurity, finally returning to the theme of escapism/transcendence. Finally, in the conclusion I examine both my own relationship to disco subcultural practices and dancing as an act of transcendence.
CHAPTER I. THE POLITICS OF THE UNDERGROUND

In *Turn the beat around: The secret history of disco*, Peter Shapiro (2005) argued that we live in a cultural moment in which disco “is no longer a five-letter word that can’t be uttered in polite company; it is no longer a guilty pleasure hidden in the closet along with your macramé wall-hangings and lava lamp” (p. 282). For Shapiro (2005, p. 281-2), disco has become safe by being enshrined in the larger processes of American cultural nostalgia: the United States government issued a commemorative stamp; the Village People played to standing ovation at a baseball game; and the machinery of Hollywood turned disco into a plot device for films only loosely connected to 1970s dance club culture. He continued:

Imprisoning disco in the gloss of nostalgia… these acts of preservation have forced disco to be seen through the rose-tinted mirror shades of irony. Reduced to nothing but stockbrokers in leisure suits and good-time girls in boob tubes, the contemporary memory of disco serves only to camouflage the pain of one of the most difficult decades in American history with an afro wig and rainbow-coloured stockings. (Shapiro, 2005, p. 282)

For Shapiro (2005), the gloss of nostalgia is also a reminder of disco’s origins and spirit: as “populist music par excellence” (p. 282), disco “[belonged] to everyone” and was willing “to be all things to all people” (p. 282-3); it was the last bastion of the integrationist dream of the 1960s before a “musical apartheid” emerged in the late 1970s and into the 1980s (Shapiro, 2005, p. 283).

In *Last night a DJ saved my life: The history of the disc jockey*, Brewster and Broughton (2000b) paint a different picture of disco’s evolution into the cultural mainstream. This history is divided into two parts. The first section, titled “Love is the Message,” traces the development of
the DJ and disco club culture in New York City from David Mancuso’s Loft to Nicky Siano’s sets at the Gallery; it focuses primarily on disco culture between 1970 and 1975. Here, early disco is equated to a religious experience: “During the rise of disco, the relatively recent line which the Western world had drawn between dance and religion was questioned and blurred” (Brewster & Broughton, 2000b, p. 164). The second section of Brewster and Broughton’s (2000) history, titled “She Works Hard for the Money,” paints a darker picture of what disco became. For Brewster and Broughton (2000b), this second manifestation of disco is barely connected to disco’s origins or subversive potential; rather, it is reflective of “a short (roughly 1976-1979) period in which some of the music crossed over into superprofitable commercialism” (Brewster & Broughton, 2000b, p. 166). Based upon this division, Brewster and Broughton (2000b) construct an evolution of disco that fetishizes the underground:

Before commercial success twisted the music into a polyester perversion of itself, and wrenched the scene out of New York’s gay underground only to drop it into the funkless lap of mainstream America, disco was the hottest, sexiest, most redeeming and most deeply loving dance music there has been. It relied on phenomenal musicianship, it was often poetic and highly lyrical, it could be as experimental and as profound as it wanted, and it was always funky beyond the call of duty. (Brewster & Broughton, 2000b, p. 126)

At first glance, Brewster and Broughton’s (2000b) attempt to divide the mainstream from the underground seems authoritative: disco’s ascension into mainstream culture certainly produced some over-commercialized music and twisted the nightlife into a parody of itself. However, there remains an uncomfortable tension in this attempt to construct disco’s commercialization around a specific time frame. To borrow a phrase from disco dancer cum author Andrew Holleran, it is a tension between the “disco, which did not know it was disco” (as
quoted in Lawrence, 2003, p. 333) and the disco that was actively and repeatedly proclaimed as
disco. In its original use, this turn of phrase referred simultaneously to the changing musical
structures of disco music as well as to the changing spaces of the clubs themselves: Holleran
decried the “terrible uniformity of beat and style” found in 1978’s disco music while
simultaneously lamenting a lost “dark disco… which was simply a song played in a room where
we gathered to dance” (as quoted in Lawrence, 2003, p. 333).

While Broughton, Brewster, and Holleran all point towards a shift in disco culture and
music, the automatic equation of this change to increased commercialization is descriptive rather
than critical; none of these authors contextualize this supposed ‘appropriation’ in terms of the
music industry of the 1970s. Furthermore, this distinction between ‘mainstream’ disco and
‘underground’ disco often becomes collapsed into “a two-tier schema of ‘good’ gay disco versus

“The disco that did not know it was disco” captures perfectly the social process of
reification, which seizes a fluid social process and crystallizes it into a commodified
image of itself, an image whose name henceforth becomes the precondition for any
retrospective narration of its alienating force… It is easy to romanticize the disco that did
not know it was disco, and to yearn for that prelapsarian innocence before, beneath, or
somehow outside of capitalist reification. (Nyong’o, 2008, p. 103-104)

In this chapter, I investigate the commodified image of disco from two directions. First, I
examine the ways in which the mainstream/underground binary misrepresents the distinctions
between multiple manifestations of disco culture by looking at disco in relationship to the
normative practices of the music industry in the 1970s. This analysis points towards a “middle
stratum” (Straw, 2008, p. 871) of disco’s subcultural practices that was not replicated in disco’s
expansion beyond its urban centers. Second, I examine how this middle stratum was transformed by gay men’s identity politics to reinscribe patriarchal power relations that pushed disco beyond its subversive, communal potential. I do this in an attempt to destabilize the “two-tier schema of ‘good’ gay disco and ‘bad’ mainstream disco” (Echols, 2010, p. 155) that is the result of these images’ intersection.

**Disco and the Music Industry**

In his analysis of heavy metal culture, Straw (2008) portrayed the practices at work in the music industry during disco’s development and ascension in the 1970s. Straw (2008) argued that the rock music industry neglected the “process whereby musicians with local followings and local entrepreneurial support established themselves regionally and proved their financial viability by recording first for major labels” (Straw, 2008, p. 868). Instead, major record labels would sign acts based upon the construction of styles and talent by “creative personnel” (Straw, 2008, p. 868-9) and then market these acts to those outside of urban centers, where “radio, retail chain record stores…, and occasional large concerts… [made] up the network by which major-label albums [were] promoted and sold— and from which music not available on such labels [was] for the most part excluded” (Straw, 2008, p. 871). Straw (2008) argued that this created a “form of involvement in rock culture, discouraging subcultural activity of the degree associated with disco or punk, for example. Heavy metal culture may be characterized in part by the absence of a strong middle stratum between the listener and the fully professional group” (p. 871). Straw’s (2008) description is important for understanding disco’s relationship to the music industry for two reasons: first, the music industry was controlled by executives oriented towards rock music; and second, this control directly influenced the development of disco culture, both before and after its expansion into the mainstream. What made disco complicated, and distinct
from heavy metal, was the composition and uneven distribution of the “middle stratum” (Straw, 2008, p. 871) that tied it to subcultural practices. However, Straw (2008) offers little explanation on precisely what forms this middle stratum took within the subcultural practices of punk and disco.

In order to provide a conceptual framework for disco’s subcultural middle stratum that does not rely on the mainstream/underground binary, it is important to examine the subcultural practices of punk, which are articulated as similar to disco’s subcultural practices within Straw’s (2008) piece. According to Hebdige (2008), the core of punk’s subculture is style: subcultures are distinct from mainstream cultures through an “obviously fabricated” image that functions as “intentional communication” (p. 591). In other words, punk subcultural forms used style to express and construct visual abjection, while mainstream cultures trend towards normative visual styles. For Hebdige (2008), subcultures construct style in three ways: style as bricolage, style as homology, and style as signifying practice. Style as bricolage emerges from the explosive juxtaposition of two concepts that appear to be mutually exclusive: Hebdige (2008) gives the example of punk’s use of the Union Jack on jackets (p. 592). Style as homology relies upon an “extreme orderliness” in the relationship of the signs to the subculture: “each part is organically related to the other parts and it is through the fit between them that the subcultural member makes sense of the world” (Hebdige, 2008, p. 593). While both of these configurations of style rely on traditional semiotics, Hebdige (2008) proposes understanding subcultural style through polysemic signifying practices (p. 595). Hebdige (2008) explains this polysemic approach through punk subculture: “we have seen how the punk style fitted together homologically precisely through its lack of fit…—by its refusal to cohere around a readily identifiable set of central values. It cohered, instead, elliptically through a chain of conspicuous absences” (596).
This strategy of refusal, which gives punk subculture its unique form, creates a cultural interference “in the orderly sequence which leads from real events and phenomena to their representation in the media” (Hebdige 587).

While Hebdige’s (2008) specific examination of punk practices can only be of limited use in conceptualizing disco’s middle stratum, his analysis gestures towards structures found within disco’s subcultural practices. First, Hebdige’s assertion that style creates an elliptical chain of signification through constructed, intentional communication can certainly be applied to disco: while punk practices relied primarily upon the visual patterns manifested through dress and fashion, disco’s stylistic ellipse emerged through the particular atmospheres established within club spaces and the dancers that frequented each clubs. For example, Studio 54 owners Steve Rubell and Ian Schrager focused on constructing the Studio 54 experience as a form of “theater” (Shapiro, 2005, p. 208) focused on celebrity, spectacle, and exclusivity. As Shapiro (2005) notes, “Rubell and Schrager… simply wanted someone to play what effectively was background music that kept people dancing but wouldn’t get in the way of the ‘scene’” (p. 209). Studio 54’s draconic door policy was also a manifestation of this stylistic choice:

Celebrities… formed the symbolic heart of Studio’s crowd, and a mix of beautiful people, dancers, journalists, wise guys, limo drivers, and other appropriate “types” were waved in to provide character, class, and variety… Rollerena, who worked on Wall Street by day and showed up in a wedding dress and roller skates at night, was never turned away. Nor was Disco Sally, Studio’s septuagenarian party girl. But when two women showed up for a Halloween party dressed as dual Lady Godivas and riding a horse, Rubell said yes to the horse and no to the women. (Lawrence, 2003, p. 275)
While Studio 54’s emphasis on disco as theater was unique, the club’s atmosphere and emphasis on scene over music reveals perhaps the most important part of disco’s middle stratum: the stylistic ellipse that gave disco’s subcultural practices coherency differed from club to club because each club was primarily a capitalist enterprise. Consequently, each club would try to create a unique atmosphere to draw dancers and keep them as regulars.

Thus, disco’s middle stratum was the relationship between the club space, the DJ, and the dancers, which changed how music was experienced in dance clubs by distancing the music as consumed in the dance club from the music as it was produced by the industry, performed by the artist, and experienced outside of the club setting. This separation occurred through a shift in the nature of the DJ as a profession: rather than existing in a role of “servitude” to the music industry and patrons (Brewster & Broughton, 2000b, p. 129), the DJ became the arbiter of the aural contours of the dance floor. Brewster and Broughton (2000b) describe this new DJ through the metaphor of a chef: the DJ “didn’t follow the pop chart menu” and “didn’t bring the customer what [s/he’d] asked for. Instead, [the DJ] cooked up a nightly banquet of new and exotic musical dishes which the diners, though they devoured them eagerly and came back for more, might never have known to order” (Brewster & Broughton, 2000b, p. 129). Consequently, the musical experience of the disco club changed night by night, and club by club: just as two chefs do not make the same meal in the same way, the individual chefs also provided variance in their respective menus from night to night to keep the palettes of the patrons sharp and focused. However, individual clubs and DJs would wed their creativity with a particular sound, a specific audience, and/or a unique atmosphere; thus, while the disco scene operated through processes of continual differentiation, each club and DJ created a point of stability through the performance of particular styles.
Lin (2008) described disco as a “cultural format accessed in a communal setting” (p. 84) that was more akin to an operating system than “a commodity pressed on vinyl” (p. 84). This operating system enabled its users (DJs and dancers alike) to customize the experience of disco through the multiplication of divergent music-making techniques (beat-matching, slip-cuing), social venues (dance clubs), low-cost or free distribution models (record-lending pools, nominal club admission), social practices, and changing technologies (mixing board, twelve-inch single, amyl nitrate)…. (Lin, 2008, p. 83-4)

That is, disco was a social and cultural process through which music was appropriated for the dance floor, rather than a form of music that was produced for the dance floor. For example, many early disco songs came from a variety of global musical traditions: Babe Ruth, “The Mexican” (United Kingdom, rock); Manu Dibango, “Soul Makossa” (France, afro-jazz); The O’Jays, “Love Train” (United States, R&B); Barrabas, “Woman” (Spain, Latin funk); and even The Beatles, “Here Comes the Sun” (United Kingdom, rock) (Lawrence, 2003, p. 84). This initial diversity resulted, in part, from the lack of a codified dance genre within the music industry: DJs would scour record stores looking for danceable songs, regardless of record label, genre, or radio popularity. However, by the end of the 1970s, the major record labels started to produce music specifically aimed at replicating and standardizing the sound of the dance floor in an attempt to market the disco experience to the masses and earn as much money from the disco craze as possible. To extend Lin’s (2008) operating system metaphor, the attempted codification and mass commercialization of the disco sound was like providing software to a computer that did not meet all of the system requirements: the software might function, but it will not do so to its full capacity or for its intended purpose.
At disco’s subcultural center, records became hits and sold copies due to their use on the dance floor. For example, consider Gloria Gaynor’s “Never Can Say Goodbye”, produced in 1973. “Never Can Say Goodbye” was a “major club hit” that saw heavy play across the disco subculture (Lawrence, 2003, p. 148); however, MGM and the radio industry did not support the record, even when record sales dictated by club play caused the song to “[peak] at number nine in the charts and [stay] in the hit parade for a total of seventeen weeks” (Lawrence, 2003, p.148). Even after the major record labels and music industry began to produce music aimed specifically for dancing and disco culture, there was still a large gap between the songs chosen by the industry and those made popular in the clubs. An example of this can be seen Gloria Gaynor’s most famous disco hit, “I Will Survive.” “I Will Survive” was originally released as the B-Side to “Substitute” (Lawrence, 2003, p. 327) and almost remained out of public consciousness until DJs at various disco clubs played the track on the dance floor (Lawrence, 2003, p. 327); on April 16, 1979, the Recording Industry Association of America [RIAA] certified “I Will Survive” as platinum (RIAA, 2013). But outside of disco’s centers, the networks of distribution were similar to those identified by Straw (2008) and discussed above: controlled by the music industry. As a result, disco outside of the club center lacked the middle stratum and its inherent diversity. As Shapiro (2005) described it: “the quintessential mainstream disco experience was…prosaic. Disco… was hearing ‘YMCA’ six times in one night at the Rainbow Room of the Holiday Inn in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, while doing line dances with a bunch of travelling salesmen” (p. 227). The contours of commercial disco were not determined by the actual practices of disco clubs, but through what the industry thought these practices were.

The transformation and elision of disco’s middle stratum can also be seen in representations of dancing; this is directly connected to the separation of disco music from its
roots in the club experience. For example, consider the disco dancing presented in *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), a film that was responsible for launching disco firmly into the mainstream (Echols, 2010, p. 185). *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) presents a complex interpretation of disco dancing that, while distinct from the actual dancing occurring in clubs, managed to present an “aura of authenticity” (Echols, 2010, p. 177). In the film, the dancers are almost always grouped in (primarily heterosexual) couples that are spread out enough on the dance floor to preserve each couple’s integrity while minimizing physical contact between couples (Figure 1). The couples, especially those involving Tony Manero (John Travolta), were often shown dancing flamboyantly, showing off their skills for the observers scattered around the edges of the space. Additionally, the film often featured special effects, such as dry ice smoke, that were not used in operating disco clubs (Echols, 2010, p. 176). On the other hand, the filmmakers shot *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) in the actual 2001 Odyssey, “one of Brooklyn’s two hottest discos” (Echols, 2010, p. 179) and included club regulars in the dance scenes rather than hiring professional dancers (Echols, 2010, p. 177). The result confused regular disco dancers and created a new type of dancing that found its way into the club spaces:

Maria Torres watched *Fever* with about fifteen other amateur disco dancers and remembers that they were all perplexed by the movie’s representation of disco dancing, particularly Tony’s moves, which didn’t resemble what was happening in the clubs. This wouldn’t have mattered much had it not been for the disco newcomers who tried to replicate Tony’s freestyle moves, and in the process, she says, “really killed the ambience” at some clubs. (Echols, 2010, p. 177)

Just as the dancing shown in the movie was distinct from that found in disco clubs, the music was also a unique blend of authentic and constructed disco sound. Not only did *Saturday Night*
This is certainly the case with the Bee Gee’s music: “Stayin Alive” and “Night Fever” both exhibit this closed structure, returning to their opening phrases at the end of the track. Each track also features lyrical repetition that occurs only within the chorus. Dyer (1979) contrasts this closed structure with the typical structure of a disco song, “which is often little more than an endlessly repeated phrase which drives beyond itself… Even when disco music uses a popular song standard, it often turns it into a simple phrase” (p. 21). For example, consider Diana Ross’s “Love Hangover”: while the first section of the song, lasting for approximately three minutes, conforms to the standard and structure of popular music, the remaining four minutes of the song feature the repetition of selected lyrical phrases over a repeated instrumental phrase.

This difference between music styles can also be seen when comparing the dancing in Saturday Night Fever (1977) (Figure 1) to that shown occurring in the Paradise Garage in the documentary Maestro (2003) (Figure 2). Certainly, the performance of dance in Saturday Night Fever (1977) can be partially described by its medium: the couple-dancing in the film was choreographed as

**Fever** (1977) “owe much of its success to the Bee Gee’s music, but this music had a much more conventionally pop structure and sound than lots of the records, particularly the Eurodisco, being played in many clubs” (p. 176).

Dyer (1979) argued that the primary difference between disco’s musical structure and conventional pop music structure was a sense of closure:

Popular song’s tunes are rounded off, closed, self-contained. They achieve this by adopting a strict musical structure (AABA) in which the opening melodic phrases are returned to and, most importantly, the tonic note of the whole song is also the last note of the tune… Thus although popular songs often depart…from their melodic and harmonic beginnings, they also always return to them. (Dyer, 1979, p. 21)
Figure 1: Tony Manero (John Travolta) dancing with Annette (Donna Pescow) in *Saturday Night Fever* (1977).

Figure 2: A typical weekend night at the Paradise Garage (*Maestro*, 2003).
part of the narrative arc of the story and performed in such a way to highlight the main characters on the dance floor. However, the specific forms of dancing featured in the film were indicative of one manifestation of disco dancing: the paired, choreographed Hustle that emerged as a specific counterpart of dance competitions within New York City (Fajardo, n.d.). Like the Bee Gee’s popular music standard, the Hustle and other competitive couple-dancing forms were contained by the duration of the performance. Outside of dance competitions, the primary form of dancing in disco clubs was what Buckland (2002) calls “improvised social dancing” (p. 70): it “was an activity, rather than a fixed structural form. This joyful flow of improvisation has order, but is not formally organized as an object with a beginning, middle, and end” (p. 70). The dancers in the Paradise Garage embody this form of dancing: they are shown in a large group in which physical contact with other dancers is a given (Figure 2). Through all of the footage of the Paradise Garage shown in Maestro (2003), couples can rarely be seen; when they are visible within the crowd, they remain connected to the masses around them rather than separated from the group. This same form of social dancing is shown on the dance floors of the Loft and the Gallery, although the footage from these disco clubs did not show a space that was as crowded as the Paradise Garage (Maestro, 2003). I will return to discuss this particular form of dancing in further detail in the second chapter.

**Disco, Gender, and Gay Men’s Identity**

The removal of the middle stratum of disco culture as it spread into the mass market was not the only change experienced by disco subculture throughout the 1970s. In discussing the homophobia within anti-disco violence, Frank (2007) argued:

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1 Dates are not given for the footage of the Loft or the Gallery; however, both club spaces operated during the early 1970s. The Loft later moved to a different location and continued to create the same dance atmosphere into the 1980s (Maestro 2003; Lawrence, 2003).
…popular music is an aural space of representation through which identities are constituted, organized, and reified within a wide range of interpretive practices and contexts. Consequently, genres of music are often claimed by particular constituencies as cultural forms that provide meaning and structure to their identity politics. Indeed, musical affiliation is frequently treated as a marker of social affiliation in U.S. culture, linking music to powerful territorial claims and sometimes giving rise to significant conflicts over the boundaries between perceived identity territories. (Frank, 2007, p. 279)

Frank’s (2007) assertion that popular music is the space through which identities are “constituted, organized, and reified” (p. 279) points towards the second change that occurred to the middle stratum of disco culture: many of the clubs became linked to specific constructions of gay men’s identities, and the songs played within these spaces served to magnify these territorial claims. Daniel Wang, a contemporary dance music producer who has worked for Balihu, Ghostly International, and Playhouse record labels, described these separatist tendencies in terms of the aural qualities of different brands of music:

In the mid-to late sixties there was the civil rights era and in the seventies there was a certain remnant idealism about having cultures mix. And you hear that very explicitly in disco music… That idealism has been replaced by commercial marketing to the correct socio-economic or racial group. (as quoted in Shapiro, 2005, p. 277)

These processes of commercial marketing were already at work by the end of the 1970s: the inter-club differentiation that made disco culture so unique began to become enmeshed within patriarchal, hegemonic constructions of gay men’s identities. In order to explore the intersection of gender and sexuality in disco music, I examine Kutulas’s (2003) critique of disco culture and position this against disco’s centering of women’s sexual needs. Then, I read this against disco’s
territorialization by gay men in order to reveal a different perception of how patriarchal power was manifested within disco.

In “‘You probably think this song is about you’: 1970s women’s music from Carole King to the disco divas,” Kutulas (2003) argued that disco functioned as a musical backlash against the women singer-songwriters of the early 1970s. Specifically, she argued:

The softer, more personal style of the singer-songwriter was eclipsed by the booming beat of disco, and the assertive female singer-songwriter was replaced by the disco diva, beautiful, sexy, and emblematic of a more hedonistic, consumerist lifestyle. The female singer-songwriter gave voice to the subversive elements of the women’s movement, but the disco diva helped contain the threat, offering women a seductive but narrower version of liberation as sexual liberation. (Kutulas, 2003, p. 174)

It is important to note that Kutulas’s primary problem with the disco diva is that this emphasis on sexual liberation as the only form of liberation masked the real divisions of gender found within American society. The disco diva (e.g. Sister Sledge, Gloria Gaynor, and Donna Summer) promised control and power through sexuality and the dance floor and was “understood to be a temporary and unreal identity” (Kutulas, 2003, p. 189). This is contrasted with the women singer-songwriters (e.g. Carole King, Joan Baez, and Carly Simon) who used folk music as “a traditional forum for expressing difference and alternatives” (Kutulas, 2003, p. 178). Women singer-songwriters controlled their music and, in Kutulas’s reading, sang about women’s issues in ways that reflected women’s experiences in the early 1970s; however, disco divas only served to provide the vocals to the dance tracks. They rarely, if ever, wrote the songs, played or produced the music, or gave voice to the “social and individual consequences” of sexual assertiveness (Kutulas, 2003, p. 188).
While Kutulas’s (2003) assertion that disco divas lacked the same amount of power and self-determination as the women singer-songwriters is true and reflective of the patriarchal power structures in the music industry, there are numerous parts of her argument that betray the limitations of these singer-songwriter’s power and influence. First, there is an unwillingness to deal with race within Kutulas’s (2003) piece. The singer-songwriters she champions are primarily white women, while the disco divas are black women. Kutulas (2003) acknowledged this distinction, but failed to use it as a critical injunction:

White middle-class women probably identified more with the singer-songwriters who better reflected their lived experiences, while African American and working-class women perhaps recognized more of themselves in the divas. Beyond their racial and class appeals, though, it was a dream like lifestyle that the disco divas modeled. (Kutulas, 2003, p. 189, emphasis added)

Kutulas’s (2003) reading of disco divas against singer-songwriters replicates the racial tensions within 1970s women’s liberation movements by promoting a white, middle class, ‘meaningful’ women’s liberation against the ‘irrational’, physical approach to liberation found in the lives of black and working class women. Consequently, her reading of singer-songwriters is not liberating at all; rather, it replicates hegemonic power relations that continue to oppress and silence the voices of women of color and lower class women.

Second, Kutulas (2003) acknowledged that a generation gap between mothers and daughters that centers on the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, arguing that women singer-songwriters provided “cultural models for negotiating between traditional expectations and the possibilities opened up by liberation” (p. 180). However, her emphasis on the

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2 The only exception is Kutulas’s (2003) discussion of ABBA’s “Dancing Queen”; however, the “Dancing Queen” is a disembodied, fictional woman, rather than an actual disco diva that produced and performed disco music.
generational gap ignores the fact that popular music, especially folk and rock, were not marketed to generations, but to the newly formed teenage consumer. Certainly, there was a tension between parents and children regarding which music is aesthetically ‘good’ or meaningful; however, shifts in teenage consumption occur as a gradual progression fueled by what is marketed as fashionable at the specific moment in time. Thus, Kutulas’s (2003) reading of liberation in the singer-songwriters is not necessarily reflective of any actual potential for liberation contained within the music itself; rather, it is reflective of her own nostalgic relationship to this music. This is further underscored by the language of potential used in the above quote: white, middle class women “probably” identified more with women singer-songwriters, but she cannot be sure. Consequently, the “backlash” against women’s liberation Kutulas (2003) sees in disco emerges not from disco’s actual relationship to gender politics, but to her own reactions to disco culture and her distinctive politicization of the women singer-songwriters. While a cultural backlash against gender equity emerged in the 1970s and became a political force in the 1980s, I argue that this backlash emerged, in part, from an active derision of femininity in those areas of gay men’s identity politics that intersected with disco culture.

Hughes (1994) argued that disco enabled the transformation of gay men from medicalized homosexuals into a sexual minority by serving as a “disciplinary, regulatory discourse that paradoxically [permitted], even [created], a form of freedom” (p. 148). By arguing that the disco song represented the dissolution of “musical, linguistic, and narrative structures” as well as “an unmaking of the artist” (Hughes, 1994, p. 149), Hughes (1994) extended the metaphor to white³, urban gay men’s sexuality and identities in the turbulent 1970s: “[Disco]

³ I include the marker “white” to reveal the racial specificity of Hughes’s (1994) argument: while he does not mark the race of this urban gay man, his analysis points towards these gay men as almost exclusively white. This specification is supported by his discussion of urban gay men and their relationship to Black disco divas; here, the cross-racial relationship plays an important part of his analysis.
thereby allows the gay man’s dissenting existence, precisely by enacting the destruction of the socialized self represented in conventional cultural products by language, narrative structure, and authorial control. In their stead, it enthrones the tyrannical power of the beat” (p. 150). This argument was developed out of a fusion between Bersani’s anti-relational constructions of gay identity with Foucauldian disciplinary power: if sexuality exists within a regulatory and disciplinary discourse (Hughes, 1994, p. 157), and gay men’s sexual acts are a form of “ascetic discipline” that destabilizes regulatory ideals (Hughes, 1994, p. 156-7), then the disco beat’s regulation and discipline of white, urban gay men constructs a specific opportunity within which regulatory and disciplinary powers can be challenged, resulting in a corollary freedom within this emergent identity.

While Hughes (1994) acknowledged that disco, for urban gay men, “is where you dance and what you dance to, regardless of the technicalities of musical innovation and evolution” (p. 148), his analysis of disco’s connection to urban gay men’s identities does not take the importance of embodied dancing seriously. In fact, Hughes (1994) pays little attention to the actual dancing: while he locates the subversive possibilities of disco within its connection to embodied experience, his analyses of urban gay men’s experience is solely discursive. For example, although he mentions the role of disco’s penetrating beat and bass-lines, this is immediately turned into an analogy for the desire and sexual acts of urban gay men (Hughes, 1994, p. 150). This analogy then allows Hughes (1994) to use Koestenbaum’s (1993) work on gay men and opera divas to explore the relationship between white, urban gay men and the Black disco divas. Hughes (1994) argues that the relationships of appropriation, objectification, and oppression, as well as a common stereotyping of sexual deviance, “made visible all the various subject positions between these previously polarized identities” (p. 153).
According to Hughes (1994), subordination to the disco beat opened three categories of identification for white, urban gay men: “femininity, blackness and mechanization” (p. 151). Because “the actual author and audience of any disco song are both indeterminate” (Hughes, 1994, p. 153), disco music enacted a violence “to fixed identity” that resulted “in a doubling, slippage and transference of black and white, male and female, gay and straight subject positions” (p. 153). This perceived slippage leads Hughes (1994) to locate a freedom within disco’s disciplinary power: “The identity that disco offers is sustained by the beat and its twin, desire; it could conceivably go on forever, like our dancing, if the music is right, but it will never be permanent, fixed or naturalized” (p. 154). The assertion that the potentialities within disco can never be “permanent, fixed or naturalized” (Hughes, 1994, p. 154) is tied directly to Hughes’s (1994) discursive approach. Throughout his analysis, he replicates the Cartesian division of mind/body, seeking the relationship between disco and urban gay men not in the experiences and expansive bodies of the dance floor, but by playing games of truth that categorize and connect the two through twists of language. As such, Hughes’s (1994) analysis fails to take into account the ways in which the three categories of identification were mediated by the embodied experience within disco clubs.

Hughes (1994) constructs the category of machine through the synthetic, repetitive beat of the disco song: “by allowing the synthesized disco beat to move you, you surrender yourself to becoming an extension of the machine that generates the beat, and consequently what is variously called a ‘man-machine,’ a ‘dancing machine’ or a ‘love machine’” (p. 151). However, Shapiro (2005) points out that “automated beats and mechanical rhythms” (p. 97) associated with disco often ignored the ways in which mechanized rhythms were present in funk, with its rigid rhythmic structure surrounded by an organic aura (p. 91-2); Motown soul, with its “assembly-
line interchangeability, particularly in its rhythm sections” (p. 95); and even rock, through its use of machine-like rhythmic structures to “master… sonic surroundings” (p. 93). Instead, the discursive focus on disco’s machine-like qualities relied upon the emergence of Eurodisco (Shapiro, 2005, p. 97), a subgenre that privileged the use of the drum-machine and the click-track (p. 98). The Eurodisco aesthetic found its penultimate expression in the “robotic precision” and “cybernetic sound” (Shapiro, 2005, p. 82) of Giorgio Moroder (e.g. Donna Summers, “I Feel Love” and “Love to Love You Baby”). However, by the end of the 1970s, Moroder’s approach to Eurodisco was fused with the British Northern Soul tradition of Ian Levine (e.g. Miquel Brown, “So Many Men, So Little Time”) (Shapiro, 2005, p. 82-3) to create a new subgenre known as hi-NRG, which would become the soundtrack to gay Clone culture.

Hughes’s (1994) metaphor of the machine also mirrors Douglas Crimp’s description of the emergent gay Clone culture in the mid- to late-1970s: Crimp argued that the gym-sculpted bodies of the Clones turned the body into a “dancing machine” (quoted in Echols, 2010, p. 121) in order to gain the most out of the weekend’s recreation. Clone culture, as described by Echols (2010), refers to a specific manifestation of gay men’s gender identity that was focused on presenting a robust hypermasculinity: Clones wore “501 button-fly Levis, flannel shirts, aviator jackets, work boots, and belt-dangling key chains”, “wore their hair strikingly short”, and “sported curiously similar mustaches” (Echols, 2010, p. 121). Just as Eurodisco and hi-NRG utilized a drum-machine to create a synthetic, assembly-line approach to dance music, Clone culture also created a machine-like identity for urban gay men. In fact, by the mid-1970s, Clone culture and the gay macho had become the visible face of gay men’s identities, especially within disco culture: perhaps the most visible and popular representation of these identities can be found in the Village People. Despite performances featuring “fastidiously masculine uniforms, girl-free
lyrics, and hip-swiveling swishiness” (Echols, 2010, p. 122), the Village People were read, outside of their gay cultural context, as an embodiment of normative masculinity: “However much this macho drag came to signify queerness within gay communities, the straight world largely registered it as standard-issue masculinity” (Echols, 2010, p. 122). The submission of gay men within Clone culture to the repetition and perversion of hegemonic, heterosexual standards of masculinity not only attempted to “undo the rigid association of homosexuality with effeminacy” (Echols, 2010, p. 124) that dominated discourses of gay identity, but also “provided protective cover for gay men who during the 1970s became a much more visible presence in the urban landscape” (Echols, 2010, p. 123).

Yet, despite Hughes’s (1994) attempt to place white, urban gay men’s identities in a strange netherworld caught somewhere between femininity, blackness, and mechanization, the rise of gay macho Clone culture resulted in the repudiation and fetishization of the feminized Other. Echols (2010) argued that the shift to hypermasculine gay identities sidelined whole categories of gay existence, as devotees of Garland and lovers of Broadway musicals came to seem antique… And so it was in America’s first gay resort community, Cherry Grove, where one veteran bartender recalls that drag-loving gays were completely out of fashion… “They used to sit around the bar and complain to me how dejected and rejected they felt. No one wanted their drag and no one wanted them sexually. It was all disco and drugs, and a big problem.” (Echols, 2010, p. 128)

When drag queens and effeminate gay men infringed upon the Pines, one of the bastions of gay macho culture on Fire Island, they “were met with bemusement rather than hostility… One Grover remembers that although the catcalls and hoots that greeted them at the disco were
friendly, they cleared the dance floor” (Echols, 2010, p. 130). In this context, gay liberation and politics, as tied to the hegemonic Clone culture, re-inscribed patriarchal values.

Hughes (1994) attempts to navigate away from this patriarchal turn of gay men’s disco culture by arguing that the urban gay man’s submission to the technological, machine-like beat allows him to “experiment with the kind of cyborg identification that Donna Haraway recommends for women” (p. 152). It is this potential cyborg identification that allows Hughes (1994) to argue that disco helps white, gay men “occupy the position of the racial and sexual other, to accept, as an almost ascetic gesture, her ‘minority’ status” (p. 152). Yet Hughes (1994) ignores that Haraway (1991) considered her Cyborg Manifesto “an ironic political myth, faithful to feminism, socialism, and materialism. Perhaps more faithful as blasphemy is faithful, than as reverent worship and identification” (p. 149). Thus, any identification with the “racial and sexual other” (Hughes, 1994, p. 152) through this cyborg status could be viewed as an ironic identification conditioned by fetishization. Echols (2010) argues:

Discologists could be right that gay’s love of divas also stemmed from identification with their narratives of pain, adversity, and resilience. However, it’s worth noting that many of the biggest gay disco hits… were anything but downbeat. It may be that in relying upon a diva to ventriloquize their emotionality, gay men achieved a feeling of control and play otherwise unavailable. (Echols, 2010, p. 149)

Unlike other manifestations of diva worship, disco diva worship was conditioned by the diva’s disembodied status: while the opera diva and Broadway diva complemented disembodied recordings with embodied, theatrical performances, the disco diva existed almost exclusively through the vinyl record and the club’s sound system. Thus, by displacing emotionality onto the disembodied diva, macho gay men not only fetishized the diva, but also “[became] their own
fetish of masculinity in that they [hid] the conditions of possibility that [led] to their becoming butch” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 78). Thus, where Hughes (1994) sees the slippage of binary identity categories as the beacon of potential freedom within gay men’s disco culture, the actual social practices and environments within gay men’s disco clubs do not support this reading: effeminate gay men and female (often black) disco divas functioned as a fetishized Other through which hegemonic constructions of masculinity could be constructed within the Clone disco culture.
CHAPTER II. DANCING AT THE PARADISE GARAGE

In the previous chapter, I argued that it is important to examine disco scholarship not through the binaries of mainstream/underground that inevitably maps itself onto “‘good’ gay disco versus ‘bad’ mainstream disco” (Echols, 2010, p. 155), but through a discussion of the middle stratum that gave subcultural disco practices its potentially subversive edge. I argued that this middle stratum exists in the unique relationship between the club space, the DJ, and the dancers. Drawing on the work of Hebdige (2008), I argued that the intersections of these relationships created an elliptical sense of style that differentiated disco clubs from one another within the capitalist economy. In this chapter, I will combine this perception of disco’s middle stratum with an analysis of one particular disco club: the Paradise Garage. First, I will situate the Paradise Garage within disco culture by tracing its aesthetic connections to both the Loft and the Gallery, as well as discussing why I choose to focus specifically on the Paradise Garage. Second, I will examine the technical specifications of the Garage, focusing primarily on the use of lights and audio equipment on the main dance floor in order to point towards the technological structures that made the Garage a unique dancing environment. Finally, I will examine memories of Paradise Garage dancers in order to reveal the affective and subjective contours of this middle stratum. I will connect these memories to analyses of the mixed sets at the club, focusing in particular on the ways in which Larry Levan, the Garage’s primary DJ, created unique aural architectures and affective soundscapes that made dancing in the club the primary manifestation of disco’s subcultural practices.

Situating the Paradise Garage

The Paradise Garage was a discotheque/dance club that was open between 1977 and 1987 in New York City. Built and operated by Michael Brody, the Garage was unique among 1970s
and 1980s disco clubs for numerous reasons. First, the Paradise Garage created its spectacle in the form of a musical mega-church: “The sermons to the flock were delivered by a sound system that has never been equaled… [The] system mimicked the qualities of David Mancuso’s set-up at The Loft, but for a dance floor packed with a couple of thousand people rather than a couple hundred” (Shapiro, 2005, p. 261). Second, the Paradise Garage was “probably the only nightclub ever to be constructed for a specific DJ” (Shapiro, 2005, p. 263): it was built to showcase the mixing techniques of Larry Levan. And third, the Paradise Garage was the only dance club, at the time, to become enshrined by a bootleg record label (Garage Records) in order to preserve Levan’s sets for posterity.

The Garage is an important site of analysis for numerous other reasons, as well. It has achieved near mythical status within contemporary dance club culture. Not only is the Garage “considered by many people to be the greatest discotheque ever” (Shapiro, 2005, p. 261), Levan, the musical star of the Garage, “is almost universally revered as the greatest DJ of all time” (Shapiro, 2005, p. 262). While Lawrence (2006) points out that this fame is, in part, due to cultural nostalgia for the lost social space, Levan and the Garage had a “greater influence on straight ‘Clubland’” (Lawrence, 2006, p. 137) than many other discos. In part, this can be explained by the Garage’s longevity: it opened at the height of disco’s penetration into the mainstream, yet managed to remain a vital part of the dance subculture until its closure in 1987, weathering disco’s symbolic death and the changing musical formats and aesthetics of the 1980s. This was because the Garage focused primarily upon the music, the experience, and the community, of dancing at the club rather than the spectacle of celebrity (as in Studio 54), an explicit connection to normative gay men’s sexuality and identities (as in the Saint), or a faddish obsession with the specific contours of the disco genre (as in disco-format radio stations and
pop-up clubs). According to Mel Cheren, former Garage regular and executive at West End Records:

[The Paradise Garage] was a different kind of dance floor in part because the people on it were so different from those at every other major disco at that time. For one thing, they were without question the city’s most serious dancers. There was no attitude here, no cliques defined by their muscles, no fashion victims, no A-list. These people were dancers. (quoted in Shapiro, 2005, p. 261)

In other words, the legacy of the Paradise Garage is the ideal place to examine the ways in which a queer affective pleasure, centered upon the dancing body, created a lifeworld that challenged normative social relationships and subject positions.

Telling the story of the Garage must begin, and end, with Larry Levan, the DJ whose “legend is beyond any reason; it feeds on itself to some extent” (Aletti quoted in Brewster & Broughton, 2000b, p. 278). Levan, like many other DJs in the Downtown Party Network, developed his mixing techniques and aesthetics as an insider to disco club culture. Shapiro (2005) noted that Levan not only frequented David Mancuso’s club, The Loft, and Nicky Siano’s club, The Gallery, as a teenager, but also began DJing at the age of eighteen (p. 263). Before discussing Levan’s DJ aesthetics, it is important to explore his two greatest musical influences, Mancuso and Siano.

Brewster and Broughton (2010) nickname David Mancuso the “Party Messiah” (“David Mancuso: Party messiah”, section 1)4 for providing the framework for contemporary dance club culture. The ethos of the contemporary dance club began with Mancuso’s house parties. By

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4 The section numbers used in the citations from this source treat each interview question as its own section, with the exclusion of “Section 1”, which refers to Brewster and Broughton’s introduction to the interview.
throwing rent parties out of a commercial loft at 647 Broadway, Mancuso attempted to create a space of community and equality:

I used to love to go out dancing at parties. Also I went through the ‘60s, with the whole psychedelic movement, the civil rights thing. As far as the music goes, I’m a very communal minded person. I had certain things I wanted to do to send a message, and it had more to do with social progress, because you had mixed economical groups… No matter how much money you had in your pocket or how much you didn’t have in your pocket, when you paid that $3, paid that $5, to get in, you got the same as anybody else. (quoted in Brewster & Broughton, 2010, “David Mancuso: Party messiah”, Section 11, paragraph 1-2)

As regulars at The Loft, such as Nicky Siano and Larry Levan, brought his dance floor aesthetic to commercial clubs, Mancuso was glad:

Because there are eight million people here. A lot of people want to party. It’s a positive thing. And the more people partying the better it is. The more you can get through the week. There were enough people around. Why not? It was like the civil rights movement: the more people you had marching the better it was. (Quoted in Brewster & Broughton, 2010, “David Mancuso: Party messiah”, section 19, paragraph 1)

Mancuso’s approach to the democracy of the dance floor was conditioned by the venue for his parties: he invited a variety of dancers into his home, only charging enough to cover the expenses (Brewster & Broughton, 2010, “David Mancuso: Party messiah”, Section 11, paragraph 2). A party at The Loft included “a clientele selected by genuine friendship, music and sound that was out of this world, and a uniquely welcoming environment: no one had even been anywhere quite like this before” (Brewster & Broughton, 2000b, p. 144). The Loft “became a refuge from
the outside world; a secret cabal of the disaffected and disenfranchised” that was “drawn from
the full spectrum of the counterculture” (Brewster & Broughton, 2000b, p. 144).

Mancuso felt that his parties were politically significant: “If you can mix the economic
groups of people together then you have social progress” (quoted in Brewster & Broughton,
2010, “David Mancuso: Party messiah”, Section 54, paragraph 1). This social progress was
located in the shared experiences of the party and mediated through the music, the dancing, and
the drugs. Just as the songs, mixed and played in a specific sequence, became greater than their
individual parts, so Mancuso hoped the dancers at his parties would merge into something
greater that worked towards social progress. The experience of the party would push the dancers
to “a higher level, a higher power” (quoted in Brewster & Broughton, 2010, “David Mancuso:
Party messiah”, Section 57, paragraph 2). This push towards a higher level created a oneness on
the dance floor, which Mancuso described:

> Sometimes for minutes, sometimes for hours. You just feel good. You have your life
> energy raised. I can’t have mine raised unless yours is raised. And vice versa. But each
> one of us has a role. It’s all about music. (quoted in quoted in Brewster & Broughton,
> 2010, “David Mancuso: Party messiah”, Section 59, paragraph 1)

But this oneness cannot be captured completely by narrative. Mancuso’s recollections are
marked by his inability to recall specific moments and details and underscored by his inability to
properly verbalize the affect of the party: “You know what I mean. You can’t explain it”
paragraph 2).

If David Mancuso was the Party Messiah, Nicky Siano was the “Wild man of disco”
(Brewster & Broughton, 2010, “Nicky Siano: Wild man of disco”, section 1). They argue that
“Siano was the DJ conduit between Mancuso’s family function and the large-scale dance devotions of Levan’s Garage” (Brewster & Broughton, 2010, “Nicky Siano: Wild man of disco”, section 1, paragraph 3). Siano’s The Gallery took Mancuso’s aesthetic and atmosphere and placed it in a commercial context. Like The Loft before it, and the Garage to follow, the Gallery “was a place to dance. Although people met there and went home with each other and stuff like that, that’s not why they came” (Siano quoted in Brewster & Broughton, 2010, “Nicky Siano: Wild man of disco”, section 19, paragraph 1). This is distinct from Studio 54, which Siano argues “added this other dimension: it was about the body; it was about the look; it was about the drugs; it was about the sex. Clubs before that, it wasn’t really the raison d’être” (quoted in Brewster & Broughton, 2010, “Nicky Siano: Wild man of disco”, section 42, paragraph 4). While Mancuso treated each record with respect, letting the choices be dictated by the atmosphere of the party (Brewster & Broughton, 2000b, p. 142), Siano structured his sets to push the crowd beyond its limits:

I mean, there are points when the music was taking people so far out and getting so peaked out, that collectively the people would be chanting, ‘TURN THIS MOTHERFUCKER OUT.’ That started at the Gallery. Can you imagine 700 people doing that? They’re blowin’ whistles and screaming, ‘Yeah yeah yeah yeah!’ Then I’d turn the bass horns and the lights would flash and go out and everyone would screeeeam so loud you couldn’t hear the music for a second. They would be dancing so hard that if you went downstairs you would see the wood floor moving. (Siano quoted in Brewster & Broughton, 2010, “Nicky Siano: Wild man of disco”, section 20, paragraph 1)

Siano used the music to create a shared experience for his dancers that pushed them into this overload, beyond which only the pleasure of dancing continued to exist.
Levan’s DJ aesthetic and the policies of the Garage combined different aspects of both Mancuso and Siano’s style. The Garage was a membership club, requiring anyone entering to either have a membership or to be the guest of a member. Hearkening back to Mancuso’s invitation system, the membership system had three effects upon dance culture at the Garage. First, it protected the “population of hardcore devotees” from an “influx of curious onlookers” (Brewster & Broughton, 2000a, Sleeve 1, “Family members only,” paragraph 1). This preserved the sanctity of dancing and prevented the Garage from transforming into a site of spectacle, as occurred in Studio 54. Second, the membership policy created both social unity and a social contract amongst the dancers, the staff, and the club space: “For those who danced there, the Paradise Garage felt like home. It was run for the benefit of its members, and changes were made not with profit foremost, but with the impact of the party in mind” (Brewster & Broughton, 2000a, Sleeve 1, “Family members only,” paragraph 3). Third, the membership policy allowed for current members to bring in non-member dancers through a guest system: each member was allowed to bring up to four guests; additional guest allotments could be granted through a reservation system (The final nights of paradise, 2009, Sleeve 4). It is unclear to what extent the membership policy was enforced: while the rules of the Garage required that only dancers with memberships and their guests be allowed into the club, out of town guests were often admitted as long as they could prove their out-of-town residency (The final nights of paradise, 2009, Sleeve 1).

The sense of family and social connection amongst the dancers at the Garage was emphasized by Levan’s techniques upon the turntables. While he was not the most technically gifted mixer, Levan became famous for his ability to create moods on the dance floor and for his “telepathic relationship with his dancers” (Shapiro, 2005, p. 262). Inspired by Siano’s approach
at the Gallery, Levan constructed not only moods and feelings with his music, but also narratives that pushed beyond the verbal state: “He was after that moment Roland Barthes defined as ‘punctum’: that instant of explosive insight where everything becomes clear… the divine contact that comes after a whirling dervish ritual” (Shapiro, 2005, p. 263). Unlike Siano, however, Levan kept the reins of his dancers firmly in hand, pushing them to the edge and then reeling them back in (Brewster & Broughton, 2000b, p. 278). Before further analyzing the ways in which dancers experienced Levan’s construction of the punctum, it is important to provide a description of the physical atmosphere and technological capabilities of the Paradise Garage.

**The Physical Atmosphere of the Paradise Garage**

Unlike many other disco clubs, the Paradise Garage opened informally before the primary club space was ready for occupation. The Paradise Garage was located at 84 King Street, inside an old concrete parking garage. At one point, a disco club had attempted to open in the space; however, “the entire 20,000 square feet of the space was utilized with no subdivision into smaller areas, no acoustical treatment and an entirely inadequate sound system” (Long & Fierstein, 1980, p. 1). This ultimately caused the initial attempt to open a club in the space to fail (Long & Fierstein, 1980, p. 1). Brody decided to subdivide the space “into a large number of smaller areas, which included a 5000 square foot dance floor and a 2000 square foot lounge” (Long & Fierstein, 1980, p. 1). Ralph Curtis, a former lighting technician at the Garage, described the dance floor as “totally self contained. Even though it stood in the center of all the surrounding lounges, it still had an atmosphere of its own… the dancefloor [sic] was just like a capsule” (Curtis, 2010). The isolation of the dance floor from the other areas of the club allowed for the concentration and direct control of the dance floor’s atmosphere, especially through the
sound system, the light system, and various special effects, without interruptions from the other areas of the club.

Because of the expenses required to subdivide the space, create a new sound system fit for the size of the dance floor, and render the concrete space acoustically sound, Brody and Levan hosted “a number of ‘construction’ parties in the lounge while work continued on the large dance area” (Long & Fierstein, 1980, p. 1). The sound system for the construction parties was from Brody and Levan’s previous club, Reade Street, and “consisted of 4 horn-loaded home speakers passively crossed over, 4 scaled-up pseudo-Klipsch corner horns using 18” drivers for sub bass crossed over electronically and 2 tweeter arrays, also crossed over electronically” (Long & Fierstein, 1980, p. 1). When Long and Fierstein were hired to create a new sound system for both the construction parties and the entire club, the proposed system design was the “first scientific application of acoustic principles to a dance club” (Long & Fierstein, 1980, p. 5). As the construction parties generated capital, Long and Fierstein were able to gradually add new elements to the existing system until nothing remained of the original system (Long & Fierstein, 1980, p. 1).

After ensuring that the main dance floor was acoustically stable, the final form of the Garage’s primary sound system ensured that dancers in the 5000-square foot space would be completely inundated with a perfectly calibrated sound. Long and Fierstein (1980) described the sound design:

Prior to moving into the large room, the speaker location was designed as follows: Each corner of the room would contain 1 Levan sub-bass horn and 1 complete tri-amplified Ultima and the longer sides of the room would have at their center point two Waldorfs and two smaller sub-bass woofers. Six tweeter arrays would be hung over the dance floor
in appropriate positions… The double amp rack to power all of these speakers… was to be installed in the balcony area DJ booth which over-looked the entire dance floor. (Long & Fierstein, 1980, p. 2)

The Levan sub-bass horn and the Ultima speakers were custom-designed for the Paradise Garage in order to maintain audio quality at high levels of volume and sound pressure (Long & Fierstein, 1980, p. 2). Long and Fierstein then proceeded to create a control system based on a four-way electronic crossover that would ensure a smooth “frequency response” and an “accurate equalization” in order to reduce feedback and prevent “offensiveness” and “listener fatigue even at continuous high sound pressure levels” by allowing the DJ to control only the levels of the “extreme low” and “extreme high” ends of the spectrum (Long & Fierstein, 1980, p. 3-4). Throughout this process, Long and Fierstein worked to ensure that Levan had “enough tools at his disposal” to create an exciting dance experience, including: frequency and range expanders, used to “undo the compression found in most recordings” and to “[provide] a blend of 25-50 Hz bass synthesized from 50-100 Hz information present on the recording;” the “Deltalab Acousticomputer and similar devices used to alter or add to the sound of the recording;” and “a 4-channel synthesizer” (Long & Fierstein, 1980, p. 5). All of this was connected to a custom-designed DJ console that featured three turntables and a complex series of switches, mixers, and equalizers that allowed the DJ to control the speakers at an individual level (Long & Fierstein, 1980, p. 6). Long and Fierstein’s dedication to creating a unique, high-powered sound system ultimately resulted “in the Garage winning every award for the best Disco Sound System ever given by Billboard’s International Disco Forums” (Long & Fierstein, 1980, p. 5).

The Garage’s lighting system was similarly state of the art: “the Dancefloor [sic] alone had over 730 lighting fixtures rigged from the ceiling” (Curtis, 2010). This was not the set up
when the main dance floor opened; however, both the sound and the lighting systems “evolved constantly right up until the time the club closed” (Curtis, 2010). The light system at the Garage had a maximum power consumption of 1087 amps, based off of “the combined wattage of the majority of fixtures on the dancefloor [sic]” (Curtis, 2010). The large number of light fixtures at the Garage was subdivided into ten groups of lights that fell into one of four lighting effects: “color washes, streak effects, psych effects, and mood lighting” (Curtis, 2010). The color wash is the most basic form of lighting: its “main purpose… was to saturate the dance floor with as much color as possible” (Curtis, 2010). The Garage lighting system created the color wash through two sets of lights: “32 scoops” which hung from the ceiling in an asterisk pattern, and eight sets of strip lights that were along the perimeter of the dance floor (Curtis, 2010). Streak effects were created through three light systems, grouped onto nine rigging rings. First were Pin beams, highly focused spot lights aimed at the dance floor; each ring had “a total of 64 pin beams” for a total of 512 pin beams (Curtis, 2010). The second set of streak lights were the “Spinners” which produced “a shaft of light [that] cut through the crowd” by “[rotating] on its [sic] axis in a 360 degree pattern” (Curtis, 2010). The third set were the “beacons (police beacons)” which “cut the room into sections in rotating angles so that no inch of the dancefloor [sic] was untouched by them;” the beacons were also set on rotating motors (Curtis, 2010). The Psych Effects were created by two sets of strobe lights: twelve Super Strobes, known for their intense, jarring strobe effects; and sixteen Egg Strobes which created a more subtle strobe effect (Curtis, 2010). The super strobes were subdivided into two groups: six were white strobes and could chase clockwise; six were yellow strobes and could chase counter-clockwise (Curtis, 2010). Finally, mood lighting was also made up of three light systems: twelve Gobo-Rotators that “[swept] the room in a slow and deliberate pace;” forty-one black lights that made lighter colors glow in UV light; and
four 30-inch mirror balls, each of which was lit by six “500 watt wide beam par 56” lights (Curtis, 2010).

The lighting controls at the Garage allowed the lighting technicians, designers, and operators to subdivide these larger groups into smaller units, down to pairs of lights; it was a truly massive control system, even by contemporary standards. According to Curtis, the controls were made up of “15 lighting control boards laid out on a console that was 6 foot [sic] long and 4 foot [sic] wide” (Curtis, 2010). These controls included not only the ten lighting systems identified above but also the non-lighting effect controls for the “Cannons and the smoke machines” (Curtis, 2010). The boards were connected to an ND5 master controller that gave “a preview option on that particular lighting effect…before sending the effect live to the dance floor” (Curtis, 2010). This allowed the light operator to “easily match the incoming song tempo perfectly and when the DJ laid the mix in, [the operator] could fade the lighting in with the music” (Curtis, 2010).

**The Experience of Dancing at the Paradise Garage**

The technical specifications of the sound and light systems only reveal one part of what made dancing at the Garage unique: the complexities of these systems could only be fully realized by the DJ and operators who created the atmosphere on the dance floor. Levan used his force of will to create cohesion on the dance floor and within the club: “What made him great was his sense of drama, his obsessive control of all aspects of his clubbers’ experience, and his heightened ability to transmit his personality through the very grooves of his records” (Brewster & Broughton, 2000b, p. 275). Before beginning at the Garage, Levan had worked at a variety of other disco clubs in multiple positions: he had been in charge of refreshments and “spiking the punch at the Gallery” and had controlled “the lights at the Continental Baths” (Brewster &
Levan was able to “take records that every other DJ in the city was playing and make them recognizably his” (Brewster & Broughton, 2000b, p. 275). In terms of the sound system, this occurred in two ways. First, Levan consistently used a variety of technical “tricks” to take advantage of the sound system, including “gradually upgrading the cartridges on his turntables throughout the night so that the peak would be overwhelming in its effect” and “manipulating the EQ levels” to tease “new nuances out of a record” (Shapiro, 2005, p. 267). Second, Levan would often create unique remixes of individual tracks during his sets. For example, Levan’s set on *The final nights of paradise* begins with Liz Torres’s “Can’t Get Enough.” While this song was popular among dancers, Levan created a unique version of the song by mixing together three distinct versions: the Dub Mix, which provided the steady bass line throughout the entire song; the Club Mix, which provided additional musical and vocal flavor; and a recording of a live performance at the Paradise Garage, which added additional vocal elements (*The final nights of paradise*, 2009, Disc 1, side A). In particular, the addition of the live performance serves an important role: for the first twelve minutes of the mix, Torres’s regular proclamations that she “can’t get enough” are sung, maintaining a disembodied and spectral quality(*The final nights of paradise*, 2009, Disc 1, side A). However, just before the transition to the next song, Levan used Torres’s live performance to connect the dancers back to the embodied experience in the club. In the recording, Torres calls out “One thing I learned about the Paradise Garage, and Larry Levan, and all of you: I can never get enough. I can never get enough!” (*The final nights of paradise*, 2009, Disc 1, side A).
2009, Disc 1, side A). As she sang the bridge, Torres implored the crowd to sing with her, to pay attention to the music and passion that is located “right here” in the Garage (The final nights of paradise, 2009, Disc 1, side A). In the final moments of the mix, Torres’s live declarations of “Can’t get enough!” are repeated by Levan, who increased the tempo and the tension of the song before mixing in Jeneatte Thomas’s “Shake Your Body,” an intense track that regularly features reprisals of the bass from “Can’t Get Enough” (The final nights of paradise, 2009, Disc 1, side A).

The combinations of lights, sounds, and effects upon the dance floor created a wide variety of affective responses from the dancers. To further explore these responses, I will analyze a variety of memories of the Paradise Garage, drawn from two sources: first, from Ramos’s documentary Maestro (2003), which explores the Garage’s role in New York’s underground dance scene; and second, from the liner notes on The final nights of paradise, a five-part bootleg album recorded directly from Levan’s final sets at the Paradise Garage. The memories contained within the liner notes are not attributed to specific individuals; this emphasizes the importance of the shared experiences at the Garage. However, the memories that each individual member holds sacred reflect different experiences that were deemed important. While I will provide the names of the interviewed dancers within Ramos’s documentary, I will refer to the individual dancers on the liner notes through a numerical system tied to the record sleeves on which the memories appear: thus, the dancer whose memories are printed on Sleeve 1 will be referred to as ‘Dancer 1,’ and so on. Throughout the memories I have collected and analyzed, three themes have emerged as important to understanding the experience of dancing at the Paradise Garage: entering and arriving at the Garage; dancing and atmosphere; and the community. These three

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5 Out of the five records in this collection, only four of the sleeves contain the memories of dancers; the fourth sleeve is a reproduction of the official rules and policies of the Paradise Garage.
themes situate the dancer’s subjective experiences within the technical and musical contours of the Paradise Garage; however, they are all intersected by a fourth, affective theme: escapism/transcendence.

**Entering and Arriving at the Garage**

All of the memories printed on the liner notes begin by situating the dancer’s relationship to the Paradise Garage. Dancer 1 first experienced the Paradise Garage on December 7, 1985, when he traveled with three of his friends to New York City for his thirtieth birthday (*Final nights of paradise*, 2009, Sleeve 1). A tourist from San Francisco, Dancer 1 and his friends decided to go to the Garage after it was suggested by other dancers at the Palladium (*Final nights of paradise*, 2009, Sleeve 1). When Dancer 1 and his friends arrived at the Garage, they managed to get past the membership policies:

> We get to the door and luckily, they let us in cuz we were from out of town and had ID to prove it—the poor people before us could not get in at all—I think they were too dressed up or something like that. (*Final nights of paradise*, 2009, Sleeve 1)

For Dancer 1, the first entrance to the Garage was an adventure, connected explicitly to the music and the sound system:

> I will never forget the walk up the long ramp to the door with the flashing lights up the ramp—I can still hear that bass pumping louder as we approached the door—it was like Close Encounters—exciting, new adventure—and we opened the door to the greatest sound system in all the world and the place was going off—Larry was pumping Stevie Wonder’s “Do I Do”—and gave it a whole new meaning. (*Final nights of paradise*, 2009, Sleeve 1)
The entrance ramp with the flashing lights was a refurbished entrance ramp, leading from street level to the second floor of the parking garage which housed the majority of the club spaces; along the sides were numerous egg strobes, providing a subtle strobe effect that matched the increasing volume and feeling of the music before one actually entered the club space (Brewster & Broughton, 2000b, p. 274). The flashing entrance ramp provided “a lift-off” (Brewster & Broughton, 2000b, p. 274) that symbolically mirrored leaving the outside world behind by ascending into what Dancer 1 later referred to as “disco heaven” (Final nights of paradise, 2009, Sleeve 1).

Dancer 2 was introduced to the garage by a neighbor in an apartment complex in Queens, whose name Dancer 2 could not remember (Final nights of paradise, 2009, Sleeve 2). Dancer 2 claimed that the first night of dancing at the Garage “brought [him] into the awareness of how free and grand life could be” (Final nights of paradise, 2009, Sleeve 2). The freedom experienced within the Garage came to affectively structure Dancer 2’s commute to the Garage every week:

Every weekend all my troubles and worries of the week were left on the E train heading for the World Trade Center as I emerged on West 4th Street to begin my Mecca to 84 King Street with my knap-sac [sic] in hand. The excitement that would build inside by heart with each step I took became unbearable until I saw “The Club” and I knew it was on. (Final nights of paradise, 2009, Sleeve 2)

Later, Dancer 2 expressed that he would “never forget… having to step into the parking garage through a small door before walking up the awesome ramp” (Final nights of paradise, 2009, Sleeve 2). Dancer 2’s affective investment in the Garage created the club as an escapist, transcendent location: because the “troubles and worries of the week” did not exist in the Garage,
it became an important social space (*Final nights of paradise*, 2009, Sleeve 2). Escaping stress and trouble, especially as conditioned upon entering the Garage, was not unique to Dancer 2. In *Maestro* (2003), Mel Cheren discussed the social function that the Paradise Garage played: “So many kids at the Garage told me that the Garage saved their life, saved them from going bad, because they had a place to get rid of their stress.” Angel Mendez, a staff member of the Paradise Garage, connected his own experiences to those he knew because of the Garage: “It was very important to a lot of people. A lot of people have stress; a lot of people had problems and nowhere to go. And you would go to the Garage and release so much energy that when you left the club, you was in paradise” (*Maestro*, 2003).

Dancer 3’s involvement at the Garage began in 1980, when she was a junior in high school, and lasted until the club closed in 1987. A “guy [she] was seeing” brought her to the club for the first time, and warned her about the atmosphere of the Garage by comparing it to other clubs in New York City (*Final nights of paradise*, 2009, Sleeve 3):

That ramp—feeling the base PUMPING! The lights looking like a landing strip and the neon sign with the palm tree. I remember that he said that this is a ‘dance’ club, not like the Funhouse or Gotham’s West… and your ass better dance, otherwise you’re gonna get tossed. He said bring a towel and get ready to sweat your ass OFF!... I walked in [and] felt the base pumping in my chest, through my heart, in the center of my soul (“Living on the Front Line” by Eddy Grant was pumping—I STILL REMEMBER THAT!) and at that moment I knew I WAS HOME. (*The final nights of paradise*, 2009, Sleeve 3)

For Dancer 3, the feeling of homecoming was connected to feeling “so free, so alive and so close to God” while dancing at the Garage. She continued: “The music flowed through me and moved me and lifted me and became a part of me, and still is to this day.” This description of feeling at
home upon arrival in the Garage for the first time mirrors the introductory narration in *Maestro* (2003):

> I’m going to tell you about walking into an oasis and feeling like I just walked into my family’s living room. It was more than just walking into their living room, it was about completely being safe from the social restrictions of the outside. Everything that the moral majority told you you couldn’t do, it didn’t exist anymore. (*Maestro*, 2003)

Both of these memories also reflect the themes found in Dancer 5’s memory of arrival at the Garage:

> I remember that first time I walked into Paradise Garage. It was the winter of 1980. Teena Marie’s “Behind the Groove” was blasting on the best sound system in the world. It was a feeling that I can’t totally describe, except to say that I truly felt at home in mind, body and soul. The nights I shared with friends and family were so sweet. (*The final nights of paradise*, 2009, Sleeve 5)

In all three of these memories, entering the Garage becomes linked to an escape from the pressures of the external world through a perceived increase in freedom: Dancer 3 felt this freedom through the ways in which the music “brought all of [the dancers] together as spiritual human beings that transcended gender and race” (*The final nights of paradise*, 2009, Sleeve 3). The opening narration in *Maestro* (2003) connected this feeling to themes of family and an escape from hegemonic moral structures. And, for Dancer 5, the freedom created a true union of “mind, body and soul” that cannot be adequately and fully described through the verbal.

**Dancing and Atmosphere**

The liner notes feature collections of moments in which the atmosphere created within the club and upon the dance floor became a transcendent experience for the dancers. These
memories are often linked to specific songs, performing artists, or atmospheric effects aimed at heightening the party experience. While Dancer 1 remembers a myriad of songs played during his night at the Garage, three songs become linked to an unwillingness to leave the Garage and the party for the day:

At 6:45, we went to get our coats and stuff and we were all ready to leave, and Larry throws on Geraldine Hunt, Can’t Fake the Feeling. The three of us look at each other and off came the clothes and the back packs went under the stage. At about 9 AM, the dance floor was filled with new people too. Finally at 10:30 we all said ok, one more and he threw down “You Know How To Love Me”—Ms. Hyman and that was the topper—it was so beautiful to hear voice just wail all over that sound system… Finally, we said that’s it and proceeded to walk down the ramp to the street and we can hear “And The Beat Goes On—The Whispers” start up and we looked at each other and went back in for more til Noon. (The final nights of paradise, 2009, Sleeve 1)

Parties at the Garage regularly lasted into the late morning and early afternoon of the following days; often, only the most dedicated dancers would remain until the very end. Often this would be around 10:00 AM, when dancers would flock to a nearby record store to purchase their favorite songs from the previous night’s party (Brewster & Broughton, 2000b, p. 280).

Dancer 2’s favorite memories of the Garage included the involvement of visual elements alongside the music. One of Dancer 2’s favorite moments combined physical special effects with music, and was described through religious terminology:

The first night I heard Chaka Khan’s “Clouds” and the burst of rainbow confetti that pour down upon us when Chaka sung out “…it’s gonna rain”. The neon oranges, pinks, yellows, and greens dots [sic] covering and sticking to my moist body. I knew right then
that I was in paradise! And I knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that if it had ever rain in the Garden of Eden it had to have been just like this! (*The final nights of paradise*, 2009, Sleeve 2)

The use of confetti within club spaces was a fairly regularly practice: Dancer 1 recalled the “wild and crazy” atmosphere at the Palladium which was created through the use of “balloons, confetti, and what have you falling all over the place” (*The final nights of paradise*, 2009, Sleeve 1). But, as Dancer 2’s memory revealed, the use of these effects at the Garage were often linked to the narrative of the song: the confetti that fell onto the dancers was meant to be interpreted as the rain Khan sang about. In addition to physical special effects, Levan regularly combined video and music to heighten the affect and tension of the dance floor without treating the video as an interlude. Dancer 2’s favorite memory of the Garage involved the construction of atmosphere through the combination of film and music:

But the event that stands out the most and has meant the most to me and one that I’ll never, ever forget was when Larry played “City Country City” behind the backdrop of “The Dragon Slayer” showing on the screen. Back then, I thought I would lose my mind. Since then I have told everyone close to me that I want “City Country City” to be played at my funeral. Ironically, this event was prophetic in nature because since I am now older this song and the depiction of that movie expresses exactly what my life has been like over the year towards maturity. It represents for me the slaying of my own inner demons (negativity and baggage) toward inner peace. (*The final nights of paradise*, 2009, Sleeve 2)

For Dancer 2, this experience became important and transcended the club space: the memory of this combination served to structure the world outside the club and, upon reflection, became a
critical representation of the rest of his life. DJ Antonio Ocasio’s favorite memory of the Garage also reflected a combination of music and video:

The crowd was just goin crazy, and it was like “Release yourself,” everybody screamin, and then he had this…screen, and he had the beginning part of “When Doves Cry” and he had the dove, and the music was goin’ like “Release yourself!” And you see the dove crashing through the door, and then it’d go right back in, and the doors would shut, and it’d be like “Release yourself!” and he did this for a long time to the point where everybody started screaming and it was like at the same time, cause we was all bugging like “Let it go! Let it go!” cause the bird wanted to get released, you know what I’m saying?... And then all of the sudden he just went bam, crash, and then it was all “When Doves Cry.” (Maestro, 2003)

In all of these memories, the affective pleasure within the music and dancing body is accentuated by the involvement of the other senses: in the case of video, through the use of sight; in the case of the confetti, through both sight and touch. The additional sensory input served to elevate the energy, pleasure, and impact of the dancing even further. In the case of Ocasio’s memory, the sensory input not only served to elevate the pleasure but to intensify it as the release was continually denied; once the release was finally granted, transcendence was achieved.

Dancer 2 also remembered another instance in which Levan used video on the dance floor: “when Larry was jammin’ and all of a sudden the music stopped and the screens that graced the dance floor started showing a portion from “Alien.” This was the bomb and everyone was captivated” (The final nights of paradise, 2009, Sleeve 2). This memory points towards Levan’s obsessive and creative control over the dance floor environment. While other DJs often maintained the smooth flow of the mix in order to prolong the dancing, Levan would suspend the
flow of music or light to create a specific image and experience for his dancers. He would often halt the music to play movie clips “before the system would crank up and… he’d hit the crowd with another favorite” or he would turn off all of the lights in the space, including the exit lights, to suspend the dancers in complete darkness (Brewster & Broughton, 2000b, p. 276). Levan would also manipulate the music through manipulating the spatial orientation of the sound. Dancer 3 recalled:

Dancing with Mick Jagger and Diana Ross to ‘Walking on Sunshine’ and actually hearing Larry move it from speaker to speaker around my head. I actually stopped dancing so I could focus in on it. It just kept going around and around—there will NEVAH be another Larry Levan. (The final nights of paradise, 2009, Sleeve 3)

The swirling, circular movement of the sound served to mystify Dancer 3 and actually interrupt the dancing; but, as her final comment on the memory mentions, it was often these tricks and surprises that made the Garage such a unique space to dance in.

Taken together, these memories demonstrate the importance of atmosphere in creating a memorable club experience; furthermore, it was the direct manipulation of the atmosphere that created important, meaningful memories for the dancers. While these memories do not present full atmospheric descriptions, they all pointed towards the shallowness of basing a discussion of disco experience solely upon the music. Curtis provided a particularly vivid description of the sensations at work on the Garage dance floor:

Suddenly with the thump of the switch, you could be plunged into a sea of darkness suspended in time, your senses clouded by the deep expanse of black, you would be alone and the air around you would be still and motionless. Your only companion is the music covering you. In the dark you feel your body coated in the cool mist of the mushroom fog
blown gently over your skin, you smell the smokes sweet cent [sic] and begin to lose [sic] yourself in this isolation. Suddenly the room explodes with flashes of light, swirling beacons of red and amber, the calm is gone, now the drive to dance harder grips you. Pools of warm colored light, swirls of magenta, streaks of white all trancing [sic] you to another state of mind . . . colors and energy driving you to move faster. You respond with all your soul, sweat pouring from [your] body as you surrender yourself to the sound.

(Curtis, 2010)

From Curtis’s memory, the atmosphere of the Garage can be seen as a delicate manipulation of intensities: the dark and the light, the silence and the music, the use of film clips and sound effects were all used by Levan to push the dancers towards the moment of surrender, to the point of punctum in which the experience becomes transcendent.

Community

And, finally, many of the memories deal with the formation of community through the shared experience of dancing in the Paradise Garage. This achievement of insight through collective communion and through the physical exertion of dancing constructed a shared sense of transcendence and belonging. As previously mentioned, the introductory narration of Maestro (2003) described entering the Garage as walking “into my family’s living room” (Maestro, 2003). The narration continued, discussing the importance of community in understanding the Garage:

It was a family that had only one rule: to love thy brother. And that was okay. When I think about this oasis, this place of total freedom, I can’t help but feel like I lost a part of myself, a part of my family. That’s why it’s not about the space itself, it’s about the community that’s inside the space that helps bring you back to that moment when you,
the DJ, and everybody involved, when it was you and them against the world. And we survive together. (Maestro, 2003)

For Dancer 3, the freedom of the music and the spiritual transcendence enabled by the club space united the dancers across identity-based differences:

And what I was most in awe of is that every person in the club, black, white, latin, straight or gay, was experiencing and feeling the exact same thing in some other way. Larry brought all of us together as spiritual human beings that transcended gender and race—music was the answer and love was the message. (The final nights of paradise, 2009, Sleeve 3)

Billie, a singer and Garage member, described this transcendence of boundaries as a process that occurred as dancers became used to the Garage space:

Larry influenced so many different people. He brought cultures together: black, white Hispanic, gay, straight. He brought women and men closer together, too, because they would hang out... So you had to learn how to relate and deal with different people that maybe you was told not to, you know, that they shouldn't be a part of your life. And then all of the sudden you find yourself in this place, and you're listening to the best music you've ever heard in your life and everyone's coming together. It had gotten where everyone had found themselves because they was hanging out in this place where you could be yourself and you could be fabulous. (Maestro, 2003)

This is not to say that there were not any social tensions within the Garage. Jose Garcia, a Garage Member, remembered seeing and feeling tensions between gay and straight dancers and argued that these tensions caused the management to split the crowds between Friday (the straight night) and Saturday (the gay night) (Maestro, 2003). One group of straight members, who were not
named in the film, recalled when the Garage opened to a straight crowd, and acknowledged that they were homophobic during their initial experiences at the Garage (Maestro, 2003). However, as they continued to go to the Garage, the homophobia disappeared: “but after a while, when you felt like you were there, we were part of that, no matter what” (Maestro, 2003).

This sense of community was dependent upon the club space for its formation, but extended into the present through the shared experiences and memories of the dancers. Dancer 5 remembered a relationship with a specific dancing partner that existed only within the club space:

The man I use [sic] to dance with every Saturday night. A BIG, TALL, bald man with a head band and shorts. He always wore the same type of outfit all the years I knew him. I never knew his name, but we had some wonderful nights dancing together. (The final nights of paradise, 2009, Sleeve 5)

Dancer 5 continued, listing the final nights of the Garage as another favorite memory:

Of course, the last night of Garage. What I really remember is everyone saying good-bye as they left one by one. Knowing that probably they would never see many of these people again in their lifetimes. Like the man in the headband and shorts. (The final nights of paradise, 2009, Sleeve 5)

Many of the memories in the liner notes gesture to these social relationships through the use of pluralist language. Dancer 3 ended her recollections with: “To all of us that were blessed enough to have been part of The Garage, I send all my love” (The final nights of paradise, 2009, Sleeve 3). Dancer 2 included not only Brody and Levan in his memories, but also the staff members; he declared that the Garage would “live on forever in the hearts of many” (The final nights of paradise, 2009, Sleeve 2). Dancer 1 declared that he and his friends would never forget their
experience at the Garage (*The final nights of paradise*, 2009, Sleeve 1). In each of these memories, the pleasure and ritual of dancing enabled the formation of community focused on the shared experience of the music: for these dancers, the love enabled by the music bridged differences, created a family, and enabled access to the divine. It was not necessary to know each other’s names or to have anything in common with the others in the space for this community to form; rather, the affective forces moved the bodies to share the experience of dancing and to transcend their individual subjectivities.

**Conclusion**

While the analyses provided in this chapter reveal the importance of the middle stratum in discussing disco club subcultural practices and the experiences of dancers, they cannot be entirely generalized when attempting to understand the experiential nature of disco culture. Each club created its own atmosphere, had its own DJs with their own aesthetics, and had their own crowds of dancers. Thus, what made the experience of dancing at the Garage important for these members does not necessarily reflect what would have made dancing at Studio 54, The Saint, The Gallery, or any other disco club an important experience in the lives of its respective crowd. Nor can the thematic categories analyzed in this chapter be viewed as universal within disco culture. However, the thickness of experience demonstrated within this chapter fills an important void within disco scholarship: it places focus back onto the subcultures that contributed to the everyday life-worlds of disco dancers and avoids mapping disco onto the ideologically questionable binary of the mainstream/underground.
CHAPTER III. THEORIZING QUEERNESS

In order to theorize a queer politics of disco, it is important to begin from a position that is not preconfigured by connections to LGBT identity politics. It is precisely because disco is assumed to have a critical, *a priori* connection to LGBT identities that this connection must be set aside when analyzing the club experience for subcultural practices. Thus, in order to explore the experience of dancers within disco clubs, it is essential to treat any relationships to LGBT identities as emergent rather than as preconfigured. Expressing the necessity of moving away from both the mainstream/underground and gay/straight binaries that serve to structure scholarly and popular knowledge of disco was the goal of the first chapter of this thesis project.

Buckland’s (2002) *Impossible dance: Club culture and queer world making* took a phenomenological approach to understanding the queer life-worlds present within LGBT club culture in the 1990s. In the text, Buckland (2002) examined social dancing in night club spaces in order to reveal the ways that the dancers “materialized the third body of recreation outside work and home, and performed an imagination of the potentials achievable through modeling a lifeworld on togetherness, individuality, pleasure, and movement” (p. 3). While Buckland’s (2002) text demonstrated the depth of knowledge made possible by performance and phenomenological studies in understanding the importance of dancing within club spaces, her conclusions cannot necessarily be applied to the approach taken to disco in this thesis project for three reasons. First, Buckland’s (2002) methodological approach depended upon an established connection between LGBT-identified individuals and club spaces: she only focused on “dance clubs that marketed themselves to queer, gay, and/or lesbian communities” that were “identified by reviewing gay and/or lesbian entertainment resources” (p. 188). Thus, Buckland’s (2002) work did not bracket the connection of LGBT identities to club culture as I attempted to do
within this thesis project. This should not be seen as a methodological failure within Buckland’s text: by the 1990s, the connections between LGBT identity politics and dance clubs had been established; yet, during the 1970s, the connections between LGBT subjects and contemporary dance club culture were emerging through disco in the 1970s. Second, the political potential identified through queer world making is tied to the subordinate social and cultural positions LGBT identifying individuals inhabit:

As queers are often denied access to state, church, media, or private institutions, they constitute lifeworlds in a variety of sometimes contesting ways that cannot assume a taken-for-granted social existence. Many people who identify as queer are made worldless, forced to create maps and spaces for themselves, without the support of these more traditional realms. In such circumstances, any queer lifeworld is itself a critique as well as a place from where participants critique these realms. (Buckland, 2002, p. 3)

While the exclusion from social institutions forms an important part of LGBT subject’s experience of the social and cultural systems, Buckland’s (2002) study did not take into account the ways in which these exclusions are experienced by those who do not claim an LGBT identity. Thus, her conclusions about the social and political importance of dancing at a club are limited by her focus on LGBT subjects. Third, Buckland’s (2002) emphasis upon queer social dancing as “not discursive, but embodied action” shifts discussions of sexual subjectivity towards a framework in which queerness becomes manifested and tied to specific bodies, constructed through performance and desire; for Buckland (2002), these bodies are always LGBT identifying even though she acknowledges the problematic aspects of “singular notions of gay or lesbian ‘identity’ and utopian ideals of ‘community’” (p. 4).
In this chapter, I will attempt to weave together a theoretical architecture through which the queerness of the Paradise Garage can be articulated without taking a causal recourse to identity politics while remaining true to the themes which emerged in the second chapter. I begin with a discussion of Lipovetsky’s (2005) hypermodernity in order to understand the broader trends of social thought that were emerging throughout the 1970s and the 1980s: disco culture emerged during postmodernity, as modernity’s temporal logic was slowly being transformed into hypermodernity. I then queer Lipovetsky’s (2005) discussion of hypermodernity with the work of Halberstam (2005) and Muñoz (2009), focusing on an alternative construction of the utopian and the future that is not based on the heteronormative lifecycle. Finally, I turn to Foucault’s (1990) discussion of the *scientia sexualis* and the *ars erotica* to reveal the role that pleasure plays in constructing the momentary, ephemeral futurity and utopian within queer constructions of time.

**Hypermodernity, the Stonewall Riots, and Disco**

Lipovetsky (2005) argued that “modern societies came into being through a huge ‘shift in time’ that made the future more important than the present” (p. 42). This emphasis upon the future has constructed three social temporal logics. Associated with the development of Enlightenment thought, the modernist shift constructed both the meta-narratives of social progress and the controlling and disciplinary structures found within Western society that were dominant until the mid-twentieth century. According to Charles (2005), Lipovetsky viewed modernity as entrenched within tradition, especially traditions “whose effect [was] to produce normalized and standardized behaviour, to train individuals and force them into an identical mould so as to optimize their productive faculties” (p. 3). From modernity rose postmodernity, which was marked by another temporal shift, focusing on the eternal present created by the end
of the revolutionary spirit and the destruction of the meta-narratives of progress. Lipovetksy’s view of postmodernity is based on the paradoxical relationship between individual autonomy and social dependency: social organization depended on “a new way of managing people’s behaviour, no longer by a tyrannical attention to detail but by exercising the least constraint and encouraging the greatest degree of private choice” (Charles, 2005, p. 7). In a postmodern context, the breakdown of modernity’s traditions was experienced as a form of emancipation conditioned by hedonistic pleasure in consumption (Charles, 2005, p. 12). By the end of the 1970s, when postmodernity came onto the critical and philosophical scene, the framework for hypermodernity was forming.

Lipovetsky (2005) described hypermodernity as a “second modernity, deregulated and globalized” that “has no opposite, and is absolutely modern, resting essentially on three axiomatic elements constitutive of modernity itself: the market, technocratic efficiency, and the individual” (p. 31-2). The market constructs the need for novelty and consumption found in the contemporary moment, while technocratic efficiency explains the domination of the technological/scientific over the ideological/religious; both of these forms construct a teleological and practical focus upon the individual as the most basic unit of consumption. This interdependence between the individual, the market, and technocratic efficiency culminated in a “revolution in everyday life” that brought about “the worship of the present” (Lipovetsky, 2005, p. 36). This revolution was predicated upon the paradoxical preponderance of excess and anxiety necessitated by consumer society: “On the one hand, the society of fashion endlessly incites us to enjoy the increasingly numerous pleasures of consumption, leisure, and well-being. On the other, life is becoming less light-hearted, more stressful, more anxious” (Lipovetsky, 2005, p. 40).
In hypermodernity, the “worship of the present” (Lipovetsky, 2005, p. 36) is conditioned by an orientation towards the future. The necessity of novelty and the precession of scientific and technological innovation have reconstructed Western notions of progress: rather than a future utopia, hypermodernity points towards a future in which the “improvement of the human condition” is made possible by “the miracles of science” (Lipovetsky, 2005, p. 42). It is not that the dreams of the future and social progress have died; rather, hypermodernity’s futurity is based on the consumerist logic of the short-term: despite the emphasis upon the present mode of consumption, Lipovetsky (2005, p. 43) argued that “our societies nevertheless continue to be turned toward the future; they still wish to tear themselves away from the way things are…” (p. 43). The future of hypermodernity is also uncertain and unclear: rather than pointing towards a clear construction of utopia, hypermodernity’s future is a romance of the negative. Lipovetsky (2005) described this uncertainty: “It’s just that the relation to progress has become uncertain and ambivalent, since progress is associated not only with the promise of better things but also with the threat of catastrophe” (p. 42).

Lipovetsky’s precession of modernity, postmodernity, and hypermodernity was constructed as a multi-layered phenomenon: postmodernity and hypermodernity have not replaced modernity. Rather, they simply new manifestations of the modernist impulses and neither should be viewed as “a major break in the history of modern individualism” (Charles, 2005, p.8). Instead, modernist and postmodernist impulses “have been forced to adapt to the rhythm of hypermodernity so as not to disappear” (Charles, 2005, p. 11). In order to understand this layered, progressive epistemology, Charles offers the metaphor of a Narcissus figure to explain this relationship. For Charles’s (2005) analysis of Lipovetsky, the Narcissus figure emerged within postmodern social and cultural shifts: it was a Narcissus who “was intensely
hedonistic and libertarian,” focused on the “festive utopia” and “protest” in order to escape the control of modernist tradition (Charles, 2005, p. 11). This Narcissus operated through a “logic of social conquest” by seeking emancipation from the modernist traditions, a logic both Lipovetsky (2005) and Charles (2005) characterized as postmodern. But a new manifestation of Narcissus emerged from this logic: he is “a Narcissus who presents himself as mature, responsible, organized, efficient and flexible” (Charles, 2005, p. 11), yet “the more responsible [his] behaviour grows, the more [his] irresponsibility increases in tandem” (p. 12). This hypermodern Narcissus “is gnawed by anxiety; fear has imposed itself on his pleasures, and anguish on his liberation. Self-obsession is these days demonstrated less in the fever of enjoyment than in the fear of disease and age, in the medicalization of life” (Charles, 2005, p. 13). As a social and cultural phenomenon located throughout the 1970s and the 1980s, disco needs to be seen within this precession of modernity, especially since disco would have been a force through which the hypermodern became established. In order to examine disco in this light, I will reconstruct two sets of phenomena through the metaphor of the Narcissus: the development of LGBT identity politics and the development of dancing.

In terms of LGBT identity politics, the pre-Narcissus modernity was embodied by the homophile social movements of the 1950s and 1960s. Homophile movements and organizations, such as the Mattachine Society, worked for social acceptance by conforming to modernist traditions and standards: “public displays of affection were regarded negatively as being a provocation to straight America’s sense of propriety” (Echols, 2010, p. 46). Often, homophile movements advocated “a more conventional, button-down masculinity” (Echols, 2010, p. 125) in order to ease social integration. Until the mid- to late-1960s, the homophile movement was the hegemonic manifestation of LGBT identity politics. The Stonewall Riots of 1969, however,
“brought about a much fuller mobilization and politicization of gays and lesbians” (Echols, 2010, p. 45). Stonewall can be seen as the catalyst for the development of militant LGBT rights organizations both within New York and across the nation “that were committed to transforming rather than joining American society” (Echols, 2010, p. 46). In this sense, the post-Stonewall approaches to LGBT liberation fulfill the description of the postmodern Narcissus: social conquest, rather than social integration, became the dominant strategy. The relationship between the pre-Narcissus homophile movements and the postmodern Narcissus liberatory movements can be seen even more clearly when examining their relationships to bar culture: while the Mattachine Society “organized a successful ‘sip-in’ to eliminate the… policy that made it illegal… to serve liquor to a group of three or more homosexuals” (Echols, 2010, p. 47), this approach depended upon a rejection of “the other seedy bars that were making money off gays” (p. 47). Meanwhile, the Stonewall Inn, and the militant organizations that developed out of the riots and its legacy, “might have been a site of transformation” precisely because of the patrons’ refusal to follow the restrictive policies that limited their consumption of alcohol and dancing practices (Echols, 2010, p. 46). In fact, Echols (2010) argues that “[Stonewall’s] dance floor encouraged greater sexual expressiveness, which in turned forged a closer connection between going out and coming out” (p. 47).

Locating the hypermodernist Narcissus within LGBT identity politics is somewhat trickier. As previously mentioned, the homophile, conformist, and modernist movements existed alongside the liberatory, militant, and postmodernist movements that emerged out of Stonewall. The relationship between these two sets is fractured, jagged, and often paradoxical: homophiles would acknowledge the importance of the Stonewall riots while simultaneously rejecting the bodies, gender performances, and identities of those who had actually been involved in the riot:
“While many inside the Mattachine thought gays should aspire to conventional masculinity, gay liberationists generally saw themselves as working toward a radically androgynous future in which gender ceased to matter” (Echols, 2010, p. 48). But both rejected the Stonewall Inn as an important space, viewing it as a “dive” and decrying its control by Mob interests (Echols, 2010, p. 48). This division can be seen as a precursor to Clone culture and its repudiation of non-macho gay subjects and bars, as was discussed more fully in the first chapter. However, Clone culture took the masculinity championed by the homophile movements and exaggerated it into hypermasculinity. Thus, the Clone can be seen as the manifestation of a hypermodern Narcissus: the transformation of his body into a “dancing machine” (Crimp quoted in Echols, 2010, p. 121) was a manifestation of health-conscious responsible behavior that was paradoxically dependent upon the future weekend’s increasingly irresponsible behaviors. Furthermore, his post-Stonewall militant and liberatory politics were dependent upon the very feminized bodies which he rejected on the dance floor.

Other than historical conjecture, there is little evidence that supports a direct connection between the political ramifications of the Stonewall Riots and the development of disco culture. Certainly, Stonewall paved the way for the repeal of same-sex dancing prohibitions in New York; and certainly, Stonewall and the development of disco subcultures heavily influenced one another. However, these influences cannot, and should not, be placed in a smooth causal relationship. The cultural processes that resulted in the formation of disco subcultures had begun before Stonewall provided the form for contemporary LGBT identity politics. Brewster and Broughton (2000b) place Francis Grasso as the godfather of the contemporary DJ, and the progenitor of the techniques that built disco culture; Grasso began spinning records at the Sanctuary in 1968, a year before Stonewall occurred (Brewster & Broughton, 2000b, p. 130).
Post-Stonewall liberation organizations, such as the Gay Liberation Front and the Gay Activist Alliance, sponsored dance parties which were attended by many notable disco figures, including Michael Brody (Echols, 2010, p. 49-50), but these parties existed alongside clubs like the Sanctuary, one spot favored by the many gay men “who never set foot in a movement-sponsored dance” (p. 51). Consequently, the relationship between LGBT identity politics and disco dancing was coincidental rather than definitive: disco and gay men’s identity politics were articulated simultaneously, but they did not define each other completely.

In this context, the complex constellation of disco subcultures can be seen as a manifestation of the postmodern Narcissus, especially when viewed as a phenomenon centered upon dance. Buckland (2002) argues that the development of the Twist as a dance craze in 1960 “[liberated] social dancing from formalized partnering, steps, and the need for training of some sort. Dancers [could] dance as part of a crowd, rather than having to find a partner, thus allowing anyone to dance” (p. xii). In this sense, dancing became decoupled from its traditional forms and was reconstructed through an emphasis upon pleasure. Disco was the penultimate manifestation of this new social dancing: the technologies and music all developed to extend the narcissistic period of dancing, to accentuate the “festive utopia” (Charles, 2005, p. 11) of the dance floor. And the hypermodern Narcissus could be seen as the ‘post-disco’ dance music of the 1980s, conditioned upon the proclaimed ‘death’ of disco: disco came to symbolize everything that was ‘wrong’ with American society and, as such, needed to be symbolically destroyed. For the Moral Majority, disco presented a future in which the sinful, abomination homosexuals corrupted good, Christian morality and destroyed America (Sandbrook, 2011, p. 349-50). Nyong’o (2008) argued that the Disco Sucks movement among rock-n-roll fans arose because of “the panicky fear that… gender and sexual distinctions might dissolve or prove porous in the ecstatic, amorphous
ambience of the disco round” (p. 102). But, perhaps most interestingly, was that the Disco Sucks movement was orchestrated by two radio consultants who killed disco to increase profits before the disco bubble could burst (Echols, 2010, p.207-08). Despite the anti-disco sentiments, the musical forms popularized by disco simply became renamed “dance music” (Echols, 2010, p. 209). Thus, the paradoxical relationship central to the formation of the hypermodern narcissus is revealed: the ‘death’ of disco was conditioned by social fears and anxieties and its death could be seen as portrayed as the ‘responsible’ thing to do to preserve social order and cohesion in the face of certain catastrophe. Yet, disco’s death was symbolic: dance culture continued, dance music was still produced, and the ‘irresponsible’ behaviors of the disco club continued to define subcultural dance practices.

From both of these perspectives, Muñoz (2009)’s construction of a queer futurity that moves beyond the quagmire of the present can be seen not just as an “invitation” to queer “collective political becoming” (p. 189) but as a call to move beyond the hypermodern paradox. Muñoz (2009) argues that we need to enact “a collective temporal distortion” that moves us beyond the structures of linear time (p. 185). If the temporal qualities of hypermodernity are conditioned by the pending catastrophes that legitimate consumption in the present, then the queer futurist response would be to embrace the present without the responsibility towards catastrophe that may or may not happen.

**Queering Hypermodernity: Futurity and the *Ars Erotica***

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of the temporal logic of hypermodernity is its deconstruction of evolutionary progression within the social. In his construction of hypermodernity, Lipovetsky (2005) identified the ways in which stability, longevity, and the focus on the long term have been pulled apart by contemporary consumer dynamics that focus
upon the present by constructing a potential catastrophic future. Because this future was constructed, it was simply another manifestation of the present that operates through the temporal frameworks that remain from modernity. These temporal frameworks included heteronormative constructions of time. In *In a queer time and place: Transgender bodies, subcultural lives*, Halberstam (2005) examined the lived experiences of transgender and genderqueer subjects in order to reveal the contours of a uniquely queer epistemology of the temporal. Halberstam (2005) argued that hegemonic understandings of time are predicated upon the logic of the heterosexual life cycle, and that this temporal logic spreads beyond the spheres of sexuality and family to the very ways in which we conceive of the future:

And so, in Western cultures, we chart the emergence of the adult from the dangerous and unruly period of adolescence as a desired process of maturation; and we create longevity as the most desirable future, applaud the pursuit of long life (under any circumstances) and pathologize modes of living that show little or no concern for longevity. Within the life cycle of the Western human subject, long periods of stability are considered to be desirable, and people who live in rapid bursts (drug addicts, for example) are characterized as immature and even dangerous. (Halberstam, 2005, p. 4-5)

While this passage focuses specifically on life-cycles, Halberstam’s larger argument hinges upon an evolutionary conception of time: in a sense, the very idea that there is a better, more stable future that can exist if we navigate our way through pending catastrophes is a heteronormative construction of time.

Halberstam (2005) argued that the “ludic temporality created by drugs” (p. 5) and the narratives of queer lives reveal “the artificiality of our privileged constructions of time and activity” (p. 5) and ultimately expose the route through which we can begin to rethink the
function of time in contemporary society. Muñoz (2009) built upon this assertion and argued that queerness constructs the future and the utopian within a permanent realm of the potential:

Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now’s totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a then and there. Some will say that all we have are the pleasures of the moment, but we must never settle for that minimal transport; we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately, new worlds. Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present. (Muñoz, 2009, p. 1)

For Muñoz (2009), basing a politics of queer futurity requires an emphasis on “a collective political becoming” (p. 189) that functions through a transcendent “collective temporal distortion” (p. 185). This collective temporal distortion is portrayed by Muñoz (2009) through the metaphor of ecstasy, which functions through a slippage of the rapturous affective state as well as the narcotic MDMA (p. 186). Together, these point towards a state of “temporal unity, which includes the past (having-been), the future (the not-yet), and the present (the making-present)” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 186). The temporal unity performs queer futurity without the anxiety of the pending catastrophe: the transcendence of linear time means that the importance of the future exists in the present, not as a way of altering consumption to prevent a catastrophe, but in pushing beyond the limits of the present to reach a transcendental, euphoric state.

In order to locate the potential locations of queer futurity within hypermodernity, and especially within disco, I turn to a discussion of the scientia sexualis and the ars erotica, two epistemologies of sexuality identified by Foucault (1990). Analyzing the manifestations and
contours of these epistemologies can point towards the possible location of this queer futurity within hypermodernity in two ways. First, Foucault’s (1990) discussion of the scientia sexualis provides a framework for understanding the disciplinary construction of sexuality that emerged within modernity, and against which postmodern practices rebelled. Relatedly, the ars erotica portrays the counterpoint to the scientia sexualis, the location of transcendental pleasure that escapes heteronormative constructions of the temporal. Second, positioning these two epistemologies together provides a perception of the paradoxes of hypermodernity that is based on sexuality, rather than consumption.

In The history of sexuality, Volume 1, Foucault (1990) detailed two different epistemologies of the truth of sexuality: the scientia sexualis and the ars erotica. In the scientia sexualis, the truth of sexuality emerges from the combination of confessional discourse and modernist narratives of medicine and science. According to Foucault (1990), this combination disciplines the individual into a specific sexual subject in five ways: “through clinical codification of the inducement to speak (p. 65); “through the postulate of a general and diffuse causality” (p. 65) “through the principle latency intrinsic to sexuality” (p. 66); “through the method of interpretation” (p. 66); and “through the medicalization of the effects of confession” (p. 67). All of these processes created an epistemology of sexuality oriented towards the pathological, constructing a hegemonic, normative sexuality. The counterpoint of scientia sexualis, the ars erotica, constructs the truth of sexuality through a connection to pleasure and mastery rather than through discourse:

truth is drawn from pleasure itself, understood as practice and accumulated as experience, pleasure is not considered in relation to an absolute law of the permitted and the forbidden, nor by reference to a criterion of utility, but first and foremost in relation to
itself: it is experienced as pleasure, evaluated in terms of its intensity, its specific quality, its duration, its reverberations in the body and soul. (Foucault, 1990, p. 57)

However, Foucault’s (1990) refusal to further capture the \textit{ars erotica} within his text offers two alternative readings, as well. First, the \textit{ars erotica} can be viewed as a process that constructs truth in ways that challenge and shift relations of power on a micro-scale: by seeking pleasure’s truth in itself, rather than in the transformation of this pleasure into discourse, the \textit{ars erotica} operates underneath the purview of the \textit{scientia sexualis}. Second, because the \textit{ars erotica} is outside of the \textit{scientia sexualis}, acknowledging its locations within Western societies, even at the point where it becomes trapped within discourse, reveals the ways that power is constantly negotiated and fluctuating, a fluid set of relationships rather than a static set of dominations.

In order to explore how the \textit{ars erotica} can be seen outside of its discursive constructions, I turn to the work of Doherty (1996) and Shusterman (2007) to explore the contours of the \textit{ars erotica}. Doherty (1996) examined the connections between the \textit{scientia sexualis}, the \textit{ars erotica}, and the narrative format of the English novel by examining the portrayals of sexuality in D.H. Lawrence’s \textit{Women in love}. By positioning Lawrence’s work within the broader discourses of sexology, Doherty (1996) argued that the \textit{scientia sexualis} and \textit{ars erotica} function differently in relation to the construction of narrative. Specifically, Doherty (1996) argued that the \textit{scientia sexualis} “is profoundly complicit with storytelling, embracing a theory of desire based on an insatiable hunger and striving that bind it indissolubly to narrative forms” (p. 138). The \textit{scientia sexualis} operates by “making sex speak… transforming its affects into stories, and thus constituting the subject through those sexual discourses that go to make up his or her identity” (Doherty, 1996, p. 138). It is this transformation of affect that constructs the \textit{scientia sexualis} as distinct from the \textit{ars erotica}: Doherty (1996) argued that Lawrence’s work positioned the need to
narrate, pathologize, and record sexual pleasure alongside the “post-Cartesian drive toward ‘Conscious knowledge’” (p. 141) as opposed to the subconscious, affective knowledge of pleasure, itself. This push to construct conscious knowledge puts the narrator of the story into a complex position in relation to the text: “Like the sexological interlocutor, the narrator probes and exposes signs of malaise through coherent narratives of explanation that account for their causes. He tells stories of libidinal displacements—dislocations of erotic object and aim that issue in pathological forms of behavior [sic]” (Doherty, 1996, p. 140).

On the other hand, Doherty (1996) characterizes the sexual acts found within representations of the *ars erotica* as “the vehicle for its state of rapturous consciousness,’ and as the source of its ultimate values from which perspective other values are critiqued and opposed” (p. 138). By exploring Lawrence’s “Excurse”, Doherty (1996) explains the distinction between rapturous consciousness and conscious knowledge in relation to the narrative:

In gesturing toward a reality beyond time and becoming, where diachronic succession gives way to synchronic stasis, ‘Excurse’ insistently pushes narration to the point of its own dissolution. Working against the narrative grain, it fissures the diegetic performance itself. In progressively distancing desire from its representation, it created radical splittings or gaps—between description and action, event and interpretation, words and their conventional referents. (Doherty, 1996, p. 148)

This dissolution “drains the narrative of desire, of its motivating force, establishing a transphenomenal, static condition of consciousness as its final attainment” (Doherty, 1996, p. 150) and is revealed as “transparent in the narrators own compulsion to offer a verbal analysis of this essentially post verbal state” (Doherty, 1996, p. 150). The reinsertion of verbal, discursive analysis marks the moment when the *ars erotica* becomes captured, at least in part, by the
discursive power of the *scientia sexualis*: the consciousness, subjectivity, and power of the *ars erotica* remains intact, but becomes linked to discursive power structures that can never truly capture the radical potential of the *ars erotica*.

Shusterman’s (2007) discussion of *scientia sexualis* and *ars erotica* began with a focus on the aesthetics of sexual activity. According to Shusterman (2007), “making a case for the aesthetic potential of lovemaking means confronting the problem that modern Western philosophy has tended to define aesthetic experience by contrast to sexual experience” (p. 55). The contradiction between aesthetic experience and sexual experience has “become so deeply entrenched in our Western philosophical tradition that the authoritative *Oxford companion to aesthetics* even insists that one of the four major desiderata for a theory of aesthetic experience is explaining the difference between such experience and the experience of sex and drugs” (Shusterman, 2007, p. 57). This is distinct from the *ars erotica* in China and India, in which pleasure is connected to an escape from morality, time, and emotional turmoil (Shusterman, 2007, p. 60) as well as to “the higher mystical union with God” (Shusterman, 2007, p. 64).

The works of Doherty (1996) and Shusterman (2007) allow the *scientia sexualis* and *ars erotica* to be read in terms of hypermodernity and queer temporality. For Doherty (1996), the need felt by the narrator to reassert verbal states and discursive power after the *ars erotica* has brought about the dissolution of the narrative can be read as based on looming catastrophe: the radical fissions and gaps brought about by the pleasure of the *ars erotica* points towards a looming dissolution in which pleasure reigns supreme with no discursive frameworks to control its manifestation. However, this very catastrophic pleasure falls within the realm of a queer pleasure, in terms of its temporal manifestations: the pleasure of the *ars erotica* disables the logic of diachronic succession and promotes a transphenomenal, synchronic stasis in which post-
verbal pleasure becomes the site of the utopian. The hegemonic response to this catastrophic pleasure, the *scientia sexualis*, is to intercede with medicine, pathology, science, and technology, in order to discipline this pleasure into knowable objects of knowledge. But the pleasure of the *ars erotica* is never completely contained by the *scientia sexualis*, just as the *scientia sexualis* can never completely describe the *ars erotica*.

Furthermore, both Shusterman and Doherty’s demarcations of *scientia sexualis* and *ars erotica* rely heavily upon a sense of the affective: the *scientia sexualis* transforms affect into discourse or attempts to remove itself from the affective all together, while the *ars erotica* relies upon a submission to affect in order to achieve transcendence. Thus, the pleasures of the *ars erotica* are affective pleasures. Seigworth and Gregg (2010) define affect as:

> the name we give to those forces—visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion—that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (as if in neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations, or that can even leave us overwhelmed by the world’s apparent intractability. Indeed, affect is persistent proof of a body’s never less than ongoing immersion in and among the world’s obstinacies and rhythms, its refusals as much as its invitations. (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, p. 1)

The affective does not discredit conscious knowing; rather, it presents an additional mode of inquiry oriented at subconscious ways of knowing. Furthermore, because affective forces exist outside of consciousness and circulate between bodies without being a part of any single body, surrender to affective pleasure is, for all intents and purposes, one way of accessing the collective becoming necessary to queer futurity.
Thus, queer futurity as a political strategy can only be seen as emergent within transcendent experience. In this sense, the escapism and transcendence experienced by the dancers of the Paradise Garage can be seen as performances not only of the *ars erotica* but also of queer futurity. There are analogues between the aesthetic use of *ars erotica* to transcend emotions and the physical world and the ways in which the dancing body was used to escape the stress of life and work outside the Garage. When Dancer 3 said that the music and dancing at the garage “brought all of [the dancers] together as spiritual human beings that transcended gender and race” (*The final nights of paradise*, 2009, Sleeve 3), she was not simply relying on religious terminology to construct a secular experience; she was describing a collective becoming. When Dancer 5 felt that he was “at home in mind, body and soul” (*The final nights of paradise*, 2009, Sleeve 5), he was describing an affective transcendence conditioned by the practice of *ars erotica* within the club space. When Dancer 2 described the confetti through an allusion to rain in the Garden of Eden, he was describing the utopian manifested within queer futurity. Thus, through the Paradise Garage, we see a manifestation of the utopian through a stylized transcendence of the quotidian.
CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis project, I used my own experiences as a dancer to guide my approach and analysis to examining the experiential nature of dancing at a disco club. As I wrote, revised, and rewrote this project, I listened not only to recorded DJ sets and mix tapes from disco clubs, but I also pursued the creation of my own set list, based upon my limited skill as a DJ. The playlist I created came not only from my own incursions into disco music, but also from published set lists, discographies, and the songs mentioned in the memories of the dancers at the Garage. Levan’s set on *The final nights of paradise* quickly became my most used vinyl records, providing the aural backdrop to cleaning, cooking, dancing, writing, and escaping. I found myself trying to locate and isolate the individual tracks on the mix, searching for the songs I came to love (“Running” by Lenny Williams), removing those which I did not particularly care for (everything by the BeeGees and the Village People), and attempting to distill my playlist down to an audio representation of my view of disco.

Because of the limited focus of the memories examined within the second chapter, as well as the application of an analytic methodology inspired by phenomenology, it is important to note that the themes, affects, and emotions present within these memories cannot necessarily be extended beyond the experiences of those represented in the text, whether this is a generalization to the experiences of everyone in the Garage or to the entirety of disco culture. Instead, this thesis should be viewed as an invitation to a more rigorous phenomenological approach to understanding disco: it is important not only to situate disco subcultural practices within the clubs themselves, but to remember that each and every club operated differently. The music served as a common language, but the space served as the mode of communication and articulation through which this language was continually transformed. Furthermore, the analysis
of each club space should be approached from a perspective that not only looks for the emergent themes that characterize these experiences but is also reflective of the intentionality with which each individual approached the club space: why people danced at disco clubs is just as important as the music to which they danced.

When assembling and analyzing the memories, analyses, and histories of disco discussed throughout this project, I continually referred back to my own bodily knowledge and experience of dancing to mixed music, whether at a club, a house party, a disco-themed party, or simply in a room with a few friends. Through my own experiences, I gained a better appreciation for the themes and affects present within the memories of the Garage dancers, as well as a better understanding of the forces at work within disco culture. In the case of the former, I, too, have felt the stress of work, school, and life slowly evaporate as I walked across campus to spend a long night dancing on a rooftop with both friends and strangers. I, too, have felt that moment of transcendence, when some particular combination of lights, music, people, and substances have built into a fleeting moment of dancing and euphoria that could not be completely captured by words but remains important for weeks, months, and even years afterward. And I, too, have used dancing to ensure that I could face the world by dancing away stress, depression, anxiety and depression. In all of these cases, I felt that the space was more important than the music, itself: it did not matter if I had never heard the song before, or if I found the vocals, dub progression, or mix to be offensive. When surrounded by friends, colleagues, and other dancers in a space which I felt at ease, I danced until I was too exhausted to dance any more.

In the future, should I return to this subject, I plan on extending my analytical net to trace, code, and reduce as many memories of dancing at a disco club as possible in order to implicate more disco clubs, dancers, and bodily responses into an analysis. In many ways, a much broader
approach to understanding the experience of disco dancing could reveal important aspects of the subcultural experience that have been lost through an overt focus on the ‘underground’ culture, the discursive and representative qualities of the music, and the ‘linear’ history of disco’s development. From this perspective, it could be an interesting project to create a taxonomy of the disco clubs of the Downtown Party Network focusing on similarities and differences in atmosphere, music, DJ, and venue centered upon experience.
REFERENCES


