

THE FIERCE TRIBE: BODY FASCISTS, CRACK WHORES, AND CIRCUIT
QUEENS IN THE SPIRITUAL PERFORMANCE OF MASCULINE NON-
VIOLENCE

DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a multidisciplinary approach that looks at the dance culture of gay men known as “the Circuit.” The circuit is a transnational, nomadic, and carnivalesque community that gathers by the thousands to dance together for a weekend in various large cities. Acknowledging the outlaw (socially transgressive) status of the Circuit community both within the Gay community and outside of it, this research examines the nonviolent masculinity of the Circuit community and the production of *transcendent solidarity*, a core experience of male bonding in the Circuit.

In order to understand the bonding particular to the Circuit, the importance of communal dance is situated in the relationship that participants have with “disc jockeys,” professionals who choose prerecorded songs and “mix” one tune in with the next without a break in the rhythm.

The outlaw nature of the Circuit is particularly interesting in that there is little to no violence among intoxicated, sexually-charged men. The phenomenon of *transcendent solidarity* is framed as a spiritual ritual that is performed by the dancing participants. In order to further frame this experience as possibly dangerous but generally beneficial, the Circuit is contrasted with the social dynamics and transcendent solidarity of two other outlaw masculinities, that of

soldiers and terrorists, while not sharing in the punitive “us against them” worldview and violent expressions of masculinity that the military and terrorists espouse.

This research is teleological; it aims to legitimize the Circuit without trying to sanitize its controversial methods, and it also aspires to point out ways in which male bonding that could be modified away from violent expression, thus leading to a reduction in violence worldwide.

DEDICATION

To my parents, who gave me intellectual curiosity and compassion.
To my Kevin, with whom all things are possible.

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and, with much love and respect, Júlio Santana Braga and Corbett Reynolds.
Eparrei Oya! Oké Aro! Epa Baba! Salve Regina! St. Michael, pray for us.

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PREFACE: BANISHING THE GOD OF MEDIOCRITY

The idea of a religious ceremony of any importance naturally elicits the idea of a festival. Inversely, every festival has certain characteristics of a religious ceremony ... its effect is to bring individuals together, to put the masses into motion, and thus induce a state of effervescence—sometimes even delirium—which is not without kinship to the religious state.

Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* 386-387

When I first “came out,” I felt out of place in the local Gay scene. Most of the Gay men I knew were effeminate and not into bodybuilding—I had little in common with them. I used to tell people I was “stray,” that is, both Straight and Gay. I finally came to the conclusion that I was a Straight guy who happened to sleep with other guys. I was especially attracted to men like myself, but they seemed so few.

That was before I went to my first Circuit party.¹ I remember walking into a large venue and looking down from the balcony at a sea of shirtless men immersed in music and lights. Most of them were in decent shape; quite a few

¹ Columbus Red Party, 1998.

were muscular. A lot of them looked, sounded, and acted Straight, except for the obvious fact that they were dancing sensually with each other.

I was astonished at what I witnessed when I hit the dance floor. There were men that actually said that they were Gay without the smallest hint of effeminate behavior or the slightest hesitation. They could easily “pass” for Straight, but chose not to. This was the first time I’d ever met “Straight-acting” Gay couples, and there were lots of them. I had not realized that such a thing was possible.

What impressed me the most was the lack of violence. All these well-built, sexed-up, and intoxicated men were socializing, but with very little swearing. Nobody shoved each other in anger, and fighting was out of the question. Aggression was expressed by icy disdain rather than fists. For the first time in my life, I felt completely at home.

This is not to say that there were no Circuit boys there who “acted Gay.” Even though the behavioral norm of the Circuit is grounded in muscle and macho, every event is well stocked with “screaming queens” whose performance of femininity keeps the “butch” (ultra-masculine) types from taking themselves too seriously. There is usually a nice balance between the two performance genres. Many men casually switched back and forth between masculine and feminine behavioral codes with hilarious results, another possibility I had not considered.

There is an old parlor game in the Gay community: “If you could take a pill that could make you Straight, would you do it?” After discovering the Circuit, my answer changed to a resounding negative. Dancing in solidarity with other Gay men was more fulfilling than anything I had ever felt as a Straight man. It was also a hell of a lot more fun.

As a scholar, the Circuit opened my eyes to something significant in human history: the Gay men’s movement as a large-scale social experiment in the generation of nonviolent forms of masculinity. Beginning in the 1970s, this movement has been helping Gay men like myself express their manliness without physical combat in a dazzling variety of ways for almost forty years. Rejection of violence by Gay-identified men is now a global phenomenon; it can be found wherever men’s Gay bars are allowed to exist. The social dynamics that mark the movement are most pronounced in the Circuit. In fact, we may consider the Circuit to be its latest and grandest expression, one in which men can express their masculinity, solidarity, and spirituality through dance. I joined this movement with gusto.

However, this movement is not without its problems.

During this early period of my new Gay life, I was doing field research on Candomblé, an African-Brazilian religion. My focus of study was on the rituals that turn mortals into living African gods. During six trips to Brazil, I observed

mediums going into trance and transforming themselves, body and soul, into their beloved deities. The Candomblé community calls its public ceremonies *festas*, the Portuguese word for parties. Indeed, these religious rituals are very much like parties. Participants (both mortal and divine) are expected to have fun.

People sing hymns that praise the Gods, calling out to them, inviting them to appear. Women and men who have been consecrated as spirit mediums dance to the intricate rhythms of sacred drums. The beat helps the mediums summon forth Gods lying dormant within them. When mediums go into trance and the Gods arrive, members of the congregation happily greet them, shouting out greetings, smiling, clapping, and laughing. In turn, the Gods dance and dance until, eventually, they are asked to leave. Exhausted and disoriented, the mediums return to normal consciousness.

Here is one important lesson I learned from Candomblé: that which makes us divine can kill us. Legends about the divine beings of Candomblé teach us that great spiritual power can cause tremendous sorrow.

The deities of Candomblé are far from perfect. All of us are *omo orixá*, children of the Gods. We share their faults and strengths in our everyday lives, just as the mediums share in their glory as they dance in the joyful ecstasy of the *festa*. If left unchecked, however, ecstasy can be hurtful. Entranced mediums don't always know when to stop. They might dance themselves to death.

Mediums learn the fabulous and tragic sides of the deities within them as part of their initiation. They are taught to control their *santo bruto*, their untamed divine identity, so that they are not harmed by it. I have witnessed the struggle for internal harmony in mediums from the House of Axé l'Oya in Bahia, Brazil, the congregation into which I was initiated.

As I attended more and more Circuit events, I noticed parallels between the Circuit and Candomblé. Mediums and Circuiteers use their bodies to transcend the normal world through dance. The same African rhythms that transport mediums into god-trance are used in underground dance music² played at Circuit parties (and house culture in general) to send participants into altered states of perception.

I am not about to draw facile and inappropriate conclusions to validate “Circuit spirituality” by equating it with Candomblé spirituality. A Circuit party is not a Candomblé *festa*. Nevertheless, Candomblé and the Circuit have common roots.

² “Underground dance music” is a blanket term for those musical genres whose roots are in 1970s disco. The predominant style is house music (Fikentscher 5-6) and includes recognized forms such as trance, deep house, Afro-pop, bhangra house (from India), and techno-house. Lesser-known genres such as tribal and “screaming divas” can be found in the Circuit, itself a subset of the underground dance music scene. House music is the preferred music of the Circuit. I will use the term “house culture” for those dance communities other than the Circuit that also favor house music.

I have personally felt moments of individual and shared ecstasy at Circuit parties that transported me from everyday reality into other realms of existence. Movement, contemplation, and community bonding on the dance floor have brought me intense pleasures beyond any in my previous experience. In turn, these pleasures connected me to the universe with a sense of intimacy and happiness that is occasionally beatific.

When Gay men dance together, they summon forth something beautiful, powerful, and spiritual.

But spirituality has its dangers. I submit that it is because of powerful spiritual experiences, not the lack of them, that the Circuit tribe has problems with desire, addiction, self-loathing, and body fascism. The Circuit is a community of secular *santos brutos* who gather where infection/healing, substance dependency/psychic liberation, and beauty/arrogance all shine through them like terrible, wonderful deities. Unlike Candomblé, however, the deities of the Circuit are left nameless and impersonal. There is no initiation that teaches dancers how to handle the forces that they summon.

These unnamed forces lie dormant within Circuit participants, the Gay male community, and humanity. Rarely are they found in the everyday world with the same intensity as a typical Circuit-inspired *festa*.

Of all the ways in which Gay men's nonviolent masculinity is expressed, it is the intensity of Circuit performance that attracts my curiosity more than anything else. Granted, all of these things that amaze me about Circuit parties can also be seen in the Gay male club scene on any given weekend. What makes the Circuit special is the way that muscle, masculinity, altered states, and hilarity have been intensified, an expansion and exaggeration of the vices and virtues in Gay men's culture. The Circuit generates a cosmology in which no honor should be given to a god of mediocrity. This intensity is what attracts and repels people. Would-be participants want to see for themselves how fabulous it is, but are not quite sure if they are fabulous enough to attend.

There is an implicit promise that, at some point in the evening, people will be able to let their guard down and unite into one vibrant *corpus*. Circuit participants greet this moment with hands in the air, shouts, smiles, and laughter. This joyful communal bond is what keeps the Circuit alive and well. For most of the folks that I know in the community, it ranks among the most intense experiences of their entire lives. It is a form of collective amnesty, a blessing to all who share it. And it is highly, highly addictive.

The biggest challenge that faces members of the Circuit community (and any of the communities in house music culture) is the realization that the pleasures that are generated by weekend-long parties must necessarily be short-

lived. Durkheim is correct when he states, “a very intense social life always does a sort of violence to the individual’s body and mind and disrupts their normal functioning. That is why it can last for only a limited time.” (Durkheim, *Elementary Forms* 228). Circuit boys and girls must learn the difference between mediocrity and moderation. Although there is remarkably little violence occurring between individuals in the Circuit, significant damage may be self-inflicted by participants who simply do not know when to stop. They would dance themselves to death.

I have no wish to portray Gay men’s masculinity as wholesome within the current set of American family values, nor do I want to describe the Circuit as a religious movement. I hope to show that it can provide us with different ways in which we can understand Gay men, family, masculinity, nonviolence, and what we hold sacred.

Currently, the Circuit is undergoing significant change: some of the parties catering to the stereotypical muscular “Circuit queen” have disappeared. Specific groups within the Gay male community are designing their own Circuit parties. We now have a fully-developed series of Leather Circuit parties, as well as growing participation in Bear and African American-based events.

At the same time, Circuit sensibilities of sensuality and nonviolence are permeating dance culture around the world. I submit that we are witnessing a

gradual process in which Straight men's consciousness of self is being changed by exposure to those dynamics of nonviolence found in the Gay male community as it spreads to the public at large. This exposure has the potential to change the social interactions between men, and minimize the terrible damage that men regularly inflict upon humankind.

Push anything to an extreme, and the result is usually irreparable harm. But the extent of that harm may differ according to context. In terms of violence, Straight men tend to project their anger onto others (resulting in damage beyond the self that may include innocent bystanders), while Gay men tend to inflict the damage onto their individual person or, at most, their partner (resulting in damage that is primarily limited to the self). Both extremes have serious consequences that should be addressed and managed to minimize negative impact.

But if given a choice, I would prefer that damage be self-inflicted rather than inflicted upon the innocent. At its roots, war and terrorism are Straight men's games. Such things as suicide bombing, air strikes, torture, and violence against women and homosexuals are well within the rules of too many Straight men across the globe as they publicly express their masculinity and solidarity with their fellow men. With all the problems that Circuit boys and girls face, and all the damage they inflict upon their own bodies/psyches/souls, the Circuit

community has within it clues as to how we can manage the violence that all too often comes with male bonding, transgression, and excess.

INTRODUCTION: OUTLAW SPIRITUALITY OF FASCISTS AND WHORES

Not you
Perhaps you
And NEVER you
Yes, fierceness is always welcome
THESE are role models

“The Door” by Circuit Boy featuring Alan T

Ooh! (Ooh!) I feel real

“You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)” by Sylvester

The Circuit is a community of narcissists and drug users. Two Circuit stereotypes say it all: *body fascists* (men who judge others solely on physical beauty) and *crack whores* (those who use illegal intoxicants). The accuracy of these stereotypes gives critics of the Circuit community plenty of reasons to condemn it.

I take a controversial stance with regards to the Circuit as a playground for body fascists and crack whores: it has a sacred dimension. This is based upon my own experiences on the dance floor and the testimonies of countless participants over the years, often reported to me at the very moment they are in the throws of ecstatic rapture. It includes the observation that these fascists and whores are not

violent, even though they tend to be more muscular, do more drugs, and are much more sensual in public when compared to the average man.

My research has a sociopolitical agenda: I am appalled by the wars, terrorist acts, riots, drive-by shootings, and physical assaults that my fellow men consider to be essential to performances of outlaw masculinity that our societies demand of them. If many men have to be excessive (and I suspect that excess is a human trait that is culturally gendered), and if the expression of masculine excess must necessarily be transgressive (what I call “outlaw”), the men of the Circuit have discovered a way to eliminate the destruction that too many guys engage in when they perform their masculinity. If we can figure out the social dynamics that guide the Circuit community (which is chock-full of outlaws), we might come up with realistic means for eliminating much of the violence that men perpetrate across the globe every day in the name of Heaven and their *cojones*.

I postulate that there are many outlaw communities (a blanket term for any community that depends on transgressive behavior for its identity) engaging in the performance of masculinity that generate pleasures associated with spiritual experiences. The Circuit is one such outlaw community with its own peculiar somatic and socio-somatic spirituality based on dance, rhythm, sensuality, altered states of consciousness, and being Gay, but not on a shared religious *praxis*. Spirituality in the Circuit is marked by the experience of intense solidarity

through communal dance, a phenomenon that is generated in spite of some unsavory and even dangerous characteristics, such as body fascism, unsafe sex, and overdose/addiction.

A positive outcome of Circuit secular spirituality is the creation of a nonviolent masculinity that is attractive to both Gay and Straight men. As such, I submit that the Circuit generates behaviors, relationships, and ethics that could reduce violence on a global scale if all men learned to adopt them, such as muscle as attractive rather than repellent, arrogance and vanity expressed through disdain rather than violence, accessorizing and eroticizing masculine signifiers of violence (thus subordinating them to the supremacy of fashion and sexual pleasure), management of sado-masochistic tendencies within safe settings for the protection of the participants (such as that provided by the Leather community), and an ethic of shared hilarity in social bonding. I further submit that these features of the Circuit could not possibly be generated if Circuiteers were not allowed to be excessive, or if the Circuit were made too respectable.

But I could not have gotten the data and experiences informing this project if I did not 1) approach the study as a participant-ethnographer who clearly stated his positionality to both the Circuit and academic communities, 2) foster a sense of reciprocity with my collaborators, and 3) assure my collaborators that nothing I say could incriminate them in what could be considered illegal behavior.

The biggest challenge I face is reporting spiritual experiences that are situated within a distinctly non-religious and carnivalesque frame. People report earth-shattering revelations and connection with the universe at Circuit parties. But these experiences are not enough to inspire the Circuit community to look beyond the next party. There is no Circuit awareness movement trying to change the world with these revelations and connections. A significant minority of Circuit participants will consistently exhibit blind, brute cruelty akin to fascism when dealing with those that they consider less beautiful than themselves. An even larger contingent will behave like shameless, drug-addled whores, both on and off the dance floor. And a small but troublesome minority will ruin their lives and the lives of others by not learning to consistently practice safer sex and/or restrain their drug use.

Nevertheless, the shallowness of the Circuit community does not negate the fact that many of us are irrevocably changed by our experiences, even when we behave like body fascists and crack whores. The Circuit is not a religious revival or political movement. It is a series of dance parties that inevitably generates transformative experiences that are clearly spiritual. These experiences allow participants to form personal relationships with humanity and the cosmos that just might have religious and political ramifications in their lives. It is up to

the participant, however, to judge whether these experiences are indeed real or simply fantasies.

One of the most important ingredients in the production of the spiritual experience is the unpredictability implicit in a Circuit event. Even though the formula for the parties has remained relatively unchanged for almost thirty years, each event brings with it new possibilities of interaction at an intense level of heightened perception. It is an arena in which what is possible is much more important than any agenda that people bring (or take away) with them.

As such, it is important for the Circuit to *not* become too predictable, too safe, too sober, too political, too religious, too structured, or too legal. The Circuit must remain outlaw if it is to be effective. People must be allowed to express their arrogance through body fascism, get cracked out on drugs, and transgress quotidian rules of propriety in the safe space of a Circuit party just so they discover their own limits for themselves. Perhaps the most important thing that people learn is this: just because you *can* do something doesn't mean that you *should*.

The positive, self-affirming lessons of the Circuit and moments of deeply spiritual connection to the universe are intrinsically tied to the performance of vanity, selfishness, irresponsibility, and drug-induced insanity. Preoccupation with physical beauty that inspires body fascism is also incentive for people to

achieve personal excellence in sculpting their bodies. The tendency to experiment with different intoxicants may also lead to a profound awareness of one's own frailties as well as cosmic insights, a greater sense of the limitless capacity for the mind to create illusion, and an appreciation for moderation in the face of unregulated pleasure.

Perhaps the most positive aspect of the Circuit comes from the premium on public performance. There is constant pressure on every participant to perform well in terms of the presentation of physique, dancing skills, cleverness in speech, and appreciation of hilarity, all while becoming progressively more intoxicated. Improved interpersonal skills and increased self-awareness are some benefits that come from joining the Circuit community and engaging in these challenging behaviors.

The source of problems that can destroy participants is also the source of inspiration for self-improvement. That is why I find the Circuit so fascinating. In the midst of all that is wrong, I consistently find something wonderful about all of us when I go dancing with a few thousand of us.

The Circuit: a window into the world of communal dance

I am fascinated with the dynamics that allow us to become one with others on the dance floor. We are no longer just ourselves when we unite, physically and mentally, into a corporate community-entity. I look at how the individual identity merges with the collective identity to generate a shared physical and mental presence. Somatics, the study of the interplay between the body and the mind, influences every aspect of this project. To differentiate the group *soma* from the individual *soma*, I use the term *socio-somatic*, the transformation of individuals into one living being through bodily movement and corresponding mental states that result when that oneness is achieved.

It is impossible to adequately understand the social aspects of the Circuit if we do not take into account the basic physical elements of popular dance that make it tick, such as music, rhythm, and physical movement. Even though I have a limited vocabulary to describe these things,³ they must also be included in my work, along with the social rules of engagement and internal states of ecstasy. I

³ The problem with describing movement and music in detail is twofold: in order to treat them with any degree of sophistication, I must use language and theory devoted to formal music and dance. This language is in many ways unsuitable for informal dance and definitely unsuitable for any written work that wants to reach people outside of college dance/music departments. If I resorted to musical theory and kinesthetic notation, most of my readers would find such technical language incomprehensible. More will be said later in this chapter.

want to 1) translate the Circuit experience into words that describe what happens inside the dancing bodies and intoxicated heads of Circuit boys and girls, and 2) investigate how this experience affects the social dynamics of a group of ecstatic people in the dance floor who have adopted “Circuit sensibilities,” both within and outside of the Circuit proper.

The usual approach of somatic studies concerning the *soma* or body-mind is individual, such as the experience of a yoga practitioner in meditation or a quarterback during a football game. However, I step outside of this approach because much of the Circuit experience (and house music culture in general) is profoundly communal in ways that yoga meditation cannot be, and that football only approximates.

Theorizing outlaw spirituality

The following is a review of theoretical sources that inform my methodology in outlining and legitimizing the performance of nonviolent masculinity in the Circuit community.

For convenience’s sake, I categorize these theorists according to the discipline in which I first encountered them, and I describe their theories in the manner that they have influenced my perceptions of that discipline. The relegation

of these theorists to one discipline is necessarily artificial since the fields of Queer Studies, Anthropology of Religion, Folklore, Cultural Anthropology, and Somatic Studies interpenetrate each other. I beg the reader to tolerate my classifications as a necessary evil, a heuristic that I employ purely as a means for establishing order.

Queer Studies

Queer Studies primarily takes its theoretical cues from three major sources, ethnographic accounts of same-sex love and gender variance of the last two centuries, critical analysis of the history of deviance (including criminalization, medicine, psychology, and religion in defining deviance and enforcing rules against it), and critical analysis of literature, film, and popular culture. The most significant figure in Queer Studies for my own research is Michel Foucault and his concept of power as fluid and multidirectional. I borrow heavily from him in his analysis of the history of sexuality as a history of pleasures that are derived as much from discourse, criminalization, and confession as they are from specific sexual acts (*History of Sexuality, Volumes I, II, and III*), I believe as he did that guilty pleasures are magnified precisely because we feel guilty, not in spite of guilt. I also subscribe to Foucault's ideas concerning the role of drugs in generating healthy forms of madness, and the Gay community as a

community of rich possibilities, with the role of oppression relegated to secondary importance in the production of Gay identity (*Foucault Live* 308-311).

Foucault's analysis of history by means of an archeology of ideas goes back (at least in his own work) to Classical Greece. Foucault's *archaeology* takes archives as the sites for his "digs." But, rather than uncover "relations that are secret, hidden, more silent or deeper than the consciousness," he tries "on the contrary to define the relations on the very surface of discourse" and attempts "to make visible what is invisible only because it's too much on the surface of things" (*Foucault Live* 57-58). It is the use of discourse as the site of my "digs" that informs my own archeology of ideas and critical analyses of the history of the Gay community, the Circuit, popular dance, and African/African American music.

My Foucault-based archeology of ideas asks these questions:

- 1) What does our analysis of discourse and performance tell us about the negotiation of power through relationships and identity?
- 2) How are discourse and performance utilized as forms of resistance?

Near the end of his life, Foucault focused much of his attention on homosexuality. He postulated that the Gay community creates 1) new kinds of pleasure and 2) new kinds of friendships. My research sees the Circuit as an

example of how the Gay community has successfully created new pleasures and new relationships.

In my analysis of masculinity, I also borrow heavily from feminist theory on masculinity as expressed by Judith Butler and Betty Rearden. Butler's assertion that gender is *performative* rather than *performed* is an important (and, I must say, absolutely necessary) postulate in my research. Butler says that gender is *supposed* to be natural, not artificial. It is not supposed to be staged but is rather the natural expression of one's own essential being. Butler explains the performativity of gender:

Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts* [italics hers]. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self (*Gender Trouble* 179).

This is masculinity's dirty little secret: it does not spring unbidden from real men; they must practice it and learn to perform it to the point where it flows seamlessly from them without any apparent effort or forethought. Butler's concept of *performativity* (performance that must appear not to be performance) allows us to recognize that the two very different commands issued to Straight masculine men (which then gets eroticized and/or replicated by Gay men) to "act like a man" and "be a man" are, perversely, identical.

Although not recognized as a Queer scholar, feminist Betty Rearden's work on masculinity as a major impetus for the public performance of violence that we call war is so applicable to my research that I must include her as a major source in my Queer scholarship. This may appear unorthodox to those who may not be familiar with the intimate relationship that exists between Queer Studies and Women's Studies, and the fertile cross-pollination that has resulted in the shameless borrowing of theories from one to the other. We need only look at the importance of figures such as Butler, Foucault, Eve Sedgwick, and Pat Califia in both disciplines.

More squarely situated in Queer scholarship than Rearden would be Michael Warner, author of *Fear of a Queer Planet* and *The Trouble with Normal*. Warner coined the term *heteronormative*, the understanding that, in Warner's words, "humanity and heterosexuality are synonymous" (*Fear of a Queer Planet* xxiii). We can further extrapolate that worldwide perceptions of heteronormative masculinity tend to link masculinity and violent aggression, a presupposition that I call into question with my analysis of new masculine forms of nonviolent expression and aggression that can be found in the Circuit.

Warner also calls into question the notions of sexual shame that are absorbed by the Gay male community from heteronormative hegemony, including shame originating in pleasures derived from participation in Circuit parties. I

make use of his statements about sexual shame and the stigmatized identity of Circuit boys within the Gay community, and I question (as Warner does) the assumption that such behavior is necessarily immoral (*The Trouble with Normal* 1-40).

Anthropology of Religion

It is difficult for me to separate the theories in the Anthropology of Religion that inform my methodology from Folklore because my previous work on Candomblé and my later work on the Circuit could be classified as both anthropological and folkloric. But I feel it necessary to make this distinction for the purpose of tracing out elements that are favored by proponents of each discipline.

My ethnographic influences taken from the Anthropology of Religion include Victor Turner and his work on *communitas*. I find myself constantly referring back to his seminal work, *The Ritual Process* in describing not only the dynamics of *communitas* but, more specifically, what kind of *communitas* is at work. I also find that I cannot speak of the Circuit experience as *communitas* without referring to Émile Durkheim and his notion of *effervescence*. Although I studiously try to avoid being universalist, and I refuse to ascribe anything to a

primitive, primal, pan-human source in my approach to the spiritual dimensions of the Circuit experience of effervescence, I have tremendous sympathy for Durkheim's own understanding of all of humanity operating under basic elemental principles as suggested in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Rather than universalist, I would call my approach to the dynamics of Circuit culture "intersubjective" and "cross-cultural," thus circumventing the need to prove that universal principles, techniques, and behaviors that apply to all humanity for all time can be derived from the performance of the Circuit.

Theories proposed by George Bataille concerning transgression and excess are important in understanding the Circuit as a phenomenon with positive economic and political ramifications. It is from Bataille (along with Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the *carnivalesque*) that I can frame the history of humanity in terms of both excess and transgression. As Bataille does in his general outline of surplus dedicated to war (e.g. as he imagines the Muslim caliphate in the first few centuries after Muhammed) or dedicated to festival (traditional Tibetan society before the Communist Chinese invasion), I can then envision warfare and festival as alternatives for the production and consumption of surplus. This allows me the opportunity to privilege festival over war as the better, more humane, means for the performance of transgression and excess. It is within this framework for excess and transgression that I situate the performance of large-scale religious

violence described by Mark Juergensmeyer in *Terror in the Mind of God* in contrast with the carnivalesque hilarity, sensuality, and inebriation found in the Circuit.

In my ethnographic study of the Circuit community, I am hugely indebted to the methodology imposed upon me when I did fieldwork on African Brazilian Candomblé. My mentor, Dr. Júlio Santana Braga from Salvador, Bahia, insisted upon a certain protocol of respect for the community that became the blueprint for my own research practice and, more importantly, my personal and professional ethos.

Braga is a man who lives comfortably in two worlds. He is recognized in Brazil as a foremost anthropologist of African and African Brazilian religion. Educated in Brazil, France, and the Republic of Congo, with fieldwork experience in Brazil and the west coast of Africa, particularly Benin, Braga has been regularly published in Brazil and overseas for his groundbreaking work on Candomblé spirituality, its importance in African Brazilian civil rights, and what he calls the *magico-religious* world that the community occupies. He is also recognized as a spiritual leader in the community as well, having undergone initiations, received titles from different Candomblé *terreiros* (religious communities), and attained the position as a respected *babalorixa* (“father of the

Gods” or chief priest) in Benin and Brazil. He is currently the spiritual leader of the House of Axél’Oya in Salvador, Brazil.

It was Júlio who first invited me to be initiated into the religion as an ethnographer-participant. I became part of a tradition of scholar and practitioner collaboration that has existed in Bahia for over a hundred years.⁴ This meant that my loyalties would be to both the world of scholarship and the Candomblé community.

As such, I enjoyed access to every ritual allowed to a person of my rank (as an *ogã* or male protector-mentor of the House). But I was forbidden to record anything by any means other than my own memory. I could only speak publicly of those things that were already common knowledge. I am permitted recount rituals, but never any *specific* ritual, because the particulars of any *terreiro* are not to be divulged to outsiders.

In other words, it was morally incumbent upon me to give the Candomblé community complete control of the official discourse concerning ritual. I could write about interpersonal relationships (which was indeed my biggest topic in terms of my research, particularly relationships between the human and the

⁴ This collaboration began with Raimundo Nina Rodrigues, Mãe (Mother) Pulchéria (Chief Priestess of the House of the Gantois), and Martiniano do Bonfim (professor of Yoruba and a high-ranking member of the Candomblé-de-Ketu elite) in the late 19th century.

divine), but I was honor-bound not to substantiate those relationships with detailed, concrete examples from my experience of ritual encounters.

This ethnographic methodology initially bothered me. If I could not base my material on exactly what I saw, who would believe me? But I discovered that there was a lot that I could say within the parameters that Braga outlined for me. My status as an insider who followed the rules of propriety, in fact, gave my words even more credibility among both scholars and practitioners familiar with the Candomblé ethos concerning privacy.

My training in “respectful ethnography” is reflected in both my own ethnographic work on the Circuit in which I make it a point not to privilege scandal and titillation over sympathetic description. It also informs my work as a journalist, where I grant those whom I interview complete control over what they say.

My respect for the Circuit community is nevertheless tempered with the need to report the problematic along with the wonderful aspects of spiritual experience, much in the tradition of the works of Hugh Urban and Jeffrey Kripal. Urban and Kripal have broached the subject of same-sex love and/or sexual scandal with regards to the Hindu saint Ramakrishna, Hindu Tantra, and various scholars of Religious Studies, including Mircea Eliade, Joachim Wach, Louis

Massignon, and R.C. Zaehner.⁵ Both Urban and Kripal have taught me that sex and scandal make for pleasurable reading of otherwise dry material. Analysis of sex and scandal gives insight into theory, and demonstrates that the performance of scholarship is much more engaging when we see how scholars embody what they teach in their lives.

Folklore

In accordance with my ethnographic training in Brazil, I also picked up theory from Folklore that further reinforced an intimate and respectful relationship between an ethnographer and the people who were the subjects of scholarly inquiry.

I recognize my positionality as an ethnographer with insider status in the Circuit. It is important that I mimic the multivocality of my community (my voice is only one among many) and remain sensitive to how my work will be received by that community.

⁵ In his classes on the history of Religious Studies, Urban regularly discussed the personal lives of those at the forefront of scholarship. Kripal investigates the same-sex yearnings of Ramakrishna (*Kali's Child*) and the eroticism that informs the writings of many of Religious Studies' scholar-mystics (*Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom*).

As a participant-observer, I have, as Danny Jorgensen says, “become the phenomenon” that I am studying (Jorgensen 62-65). My movement into the status of participant-observer, however, was not that of a researcher who joined the group in question. I was a member of the Circuit community who then decided to formally observe it as an ethnographer.

There are many ways by which one can do participant observation. In hindsight, I have discovered that my own methodology in the production of *The Fierce Tribe* (and its predecessor, “The Circuit: Gay Men’s Techniques of Ecstasy” in *Manly Traditions*) is similar to Zora Neale Hurston’s classic, *Mules and Men*. Like Hurston, I speak identify with the community I study as “we,” not “they.” Like Hurston, my research is teleological (it is meant to legitimize the folk in question) and I rely heavily on my own experiences within my community to direct my research, just as she did. In the chapters found in “Appendix: Notes from the Field,” I give accounts from my own lived experience that were published by the Gay press or on Circuit-oriented listserves. These accounts are well within the tradition started by Hurston of ethnographic journalism written by a participant-observer.

But I do not go into my own personal experiences as a participant-observer to the same degree as Hurston. My methodology resembles more closely that of Júlio Braga, whose research is clearly has the goal of legitimizing his

people, but does not detail his own lived experience or that of his collaborators. In his ethnographic history of Candomblé, *Na Gamela do Feitiço: Repressão e Resistência nos Candomblés da Bahia* (On the Magical Offering Tray: Repression and Resistance in the Candomblé Communities of Bahia), Braga writes from his position as a practitioner of Candomblé⁶ with few, if any, direct accounts of his own (or anyone else's) experiences in the ritual setting. This is very different from Hurston's first-person accounts of Hoodoo in *Mules and Men* (183-285). Braga's methodology requires the reader to take for granted that he, as a figure of authority recognized by the Candomblé community, is a credible source without having to certify his credibility by delving deeply into his lived experience or substantiating his claims with interviews, statistics, or any other forms of ethnographic data.⁷ He supports his scholarship in *Na Gamela* by referring to journals, private letters, and articles written about important figures in the movement, as did Édison Carneiro,⁸ the renowned African Brazilian folklorist-

⁶ At the time in which he wrote *Na Gamela*, however, he was not yet a practicing *babalorixá* in his own *casa*.

⁷ I suspect that this "shyness" concerning one's own experience is a shared trait among Brazilians involved intimately with Candomblé. There is a premium in Candomblé society placed on privacy, both individual and communal.

⁸ Carneiro wrote newspaper articles supporting the rights of the Candomblé community. He also wrote *Candomblés da Bahia*, a general survey of different denominations and African ethnic influences represented within Candomblé (Dahomean, Yoruba, and Congolese, to name the dominant forms), all of which

journalist who helped legitimize Candomblé in Brazilian society, during the 1930s and '40s. Vivaldo da Costa Lima, author of the highly acclaimed *A Família-de-Santo nos Candomblés Jeje-Nagôs da Bahia* (The Family-of-Saint in the Jeje-Nagô Candomblé Communities of Bahia), gives us an example of a more traditionally anthropological approach, but resists bringing the reader *too* close. He takes the stance of detached narrator after asserting his own personal commitment and intimate connection to the Candomblé community.⁹ All of the above Brazilian scholars are scholar-participants initiated into the religion, and all of them take the pattern of teleological, personally-detached ethnographic legitimization from Nina Rodrigues, the first scholar to write in defense of the Candomblé community as a participant-observer in the late 1890s.¹⁰

showed that Candomblé was made up of culturally sophisticated communities that could trace their heritage to classical African forms from West and West-Central Africa. He also worked with American ethnographer Ruth Landes while she researched African religion in Bahia for her book, *City of Women*.

⁹ Lima expressed to me in no uncertain terms that the usual trappings of ethnography (audio recorders, notebooks, etc.) were not only forbidden within the ritual setting but inferior means of doing research. He saw them as vehicles for the production of sensationalist exposés, more fit for “yellow journalism” than sophisticated and truly insightful scholarship (personal communication, March 1997, Salvador, Bahia, Brazil).

¹⁰ Rodrigues wrote *Os Africanos no Brasil* (The Africans in Brazil) between 1890 and 1905. It was the first scholarly work to claim that African religion in Brazil was a valid religion of the state, and was thus guaranteed protection under the Brazilian Constitution (Braga 23).

Like Braga, Hurston, Carneiro, Lima, and Rodrigues, I have established myself as trusted insider, recognized as such by the community of which I write. My standing has been validated in print; I have been published multiple times in *Circuit Noize*, the only journal dedicated solely to the Circuit community, and I have written several articles in support of the community for the Gay press. I find the strategy of writing as a Circuit insider without constantly describing my insider experiences in detail to be a good one for the same reasons that Rodrigues and Carneiro (and to a lesser extent, Braga) did so: they were members of an outlaw community. Candomblé was not legalized until the middle of the 20th century. Rodrigues and Carneiro risked exposing themselves to ridicule from their academic peers and possible arrest by the police for their intimate involvement with something considered to be on the wrong side of the law, the church, and civilized society. In addition to self-protection, there is an added bonus in their resistance to discussing actual accounts of lived experience: there is less chance of inadvertently getting their sources in trouble by revealing names, times, places, and behaviors that might get their collaborators arrested.

Still, I am not as constrained in my approach as Rodrigues and Carneiro. The scholarship of their times was not as amenable to taking spiritual experiences seriously as folklore in the 21st century. I can discuss ecstasy without being dismissed as unscholarly. I subscribe to David Hufford's category of *core*

experience to relate the bonding experience of the Circuit to other forms of communal bonding. I call this core experience “transcendent solidarity,” the unification of individuals into one *corpus* through shared ecstasy. I do not subscribe, however, to Hufford’s assertion that “A core experience will occur in all populations regardless of cultural references” (Hufford, “Beings without Bodies” 32) because I am cautious about asserting any cultural universals beyond basic physiologically-grounded behaviors. I discuss my experience of transcendental solidarity (albeit in very general terms), and I name this phenomenon as *the* core experience of the Circuit community on my own authority as a scholar who has shared that experience with other participants. My work resembles that of the experience-based scholarship of Braga and French scholar-participants of African Brazilian religion, such as Roger Bastide, Serge Bramly, and photographer-anthropologist Pierre Verger¹¹ (Braga studied with Verger), all of whose research is grounded in a phenomenological approach that treats altered states associated with music, dance, and trance as a core experience of what Braga calls the “magico-religious” world, the “sacred universe” of Candomblé.¹²

¹¹ These French scholars are much more open about their own lived experience than the aforementioned Brazilians. Incidentally, Verger was friends with Erika Bourguignon and her late husband, Paul-Henri.

¹² Interview, March 26, 1996, Salvador, Bahia, Brazil.

I do not claim, however, that the communal altered state of transcendent solidarity is the same core experience of trance experienced by mediums in Candomblé.

In her research on altered states, Erika Bourguignon proposes that altered states in religious ritual is a worldwide phenomenon (Bourguignon 137) and could be considered, in Hufford's terminology, a set of core experiences, each one shared by many different spiritual communities and interpreted in myriad ways that need not agree with each other, but with cross-cultural psycho-physiological traits in common. I likewise feel that the transcendental solidarity prized in the Circuit is an altered state and a core experience for other groups, including soldiers, terrorists, and Ravers, that is similar in performance, but understood in different ways.

Hufford defines "spiritual belief" as "the belief that spirits and a distinctly spiritual domain exist" ("Beings without Bodies" 15). With regards to the Circuit, however, I am examining a secular form of spirituality that is not only non-religious but is also noncommittal about the existence of nonliving spiritual beings. The core experience of transcendent solidarity within the flexible spirituality of the Circuit needs not result in a coherent belief system at all. As a secular-based spiritual community, belief in anything other than the shared experience of transcendent solidarity (which remains officially unmarked,

unregulated, and unenforced) is not a prerequisite for membership in the Circuit community.

There is precedent for the secondary importance of belief in certain forms of spiritual expression, including Candomblé, a religion in which there is no pre-set creed or set of beliefs that are required of its members. The basis for community in Candomblé is a profound respect for ritual propriety and etiquette shown to the living, the dead, and the Gods without necessarily having to believe that the dead and the Gods exist as sentient beings. This is where my own training as a scholar of religion, situated in my performance as an initiated member of Axél'Oya and currently as a participant-observer in the Circuit community, informs my methodology in outlining the core experience of the Circuit as based upon a praxis that does not dictate to its proponents exactly what they should believe.

I have another reason for highlighting transcendent solidarity in the Circuit as a core experience, and that is to show how this core experience is also present in other groups, such as soldiers, terrorists, and Ravers. I find that people resonate well with the notion of ecstatic bonding. This notion is very appealing and discussion of it is a pleasurable exercise for many people, including scholars, soldiers, Ravers, and Circuiteers (I have yet to discuss it with terrorists).

Our theoretical constructs do more than merely establish our credentials as legitimate scholars. We design them for the purpose of giving ourselves, our folk, and our academic audience pleasure. In his article, “Belief and the American Folk.” Mullen offers an insightful analysis of folklore at the turn of the millennium:

Folklorists have a tendency to celebrate the people and communities we work with, and as a result we have produced numerous valuable, although sometimes overly idealized, studies of marginalized cultures. We have turned away from the overt pathologizing of the folk but not completely from idealizing and romanticizing them (130-31).

When we look at the “idealizing and romanticizing” of our folk in terms of pleasure, it is obvious that, when we praise them, we praise ourselves. We often court their admiration of us as their champions, the means by which they gain self-legitimization and the respect of others. In the words of the immortal disco diva/drag queen Sylvester, we make our folk “feel mighty real.” Besides, those that develop theories for the purpose of negatively criticizing the folk still appeal to pleasures associated with scandal, insult, confession, and exposé. My academic audience wants dirt as well as glitter, and I am more than happy to give them a heap. Personally, I find it necessary to “dish” (describe the scandalous) on Circuit folk, especially since I idealize the Circuit community as the possessors of a form of masculinity that could lead to world peace. I would appear naïve, uninformed, or even fanatical if I did not titillate the reader with some indications as to how

excessive and transgressive the Circuit community can be. As such, I aim to write as balanced, fair, and provocative as I possibly can.

As I mentioned earlier, I have been writing for the Gay press while doing research. More than a few of my articles have been about the Circuit, and I find that, as I became more skilled as a journalist, my academic writing has become much less cumbersome and more entertaining (with the exception of chapters on theory such as this one). I find myself in good company; Carneiro and Hurston were also journalist-folklorists.

Reflexivity and reciprocal ethnography

As a scholar with my feet dancing in both worlds, I understand the importance of being reflexive, that is, transparency of my own role in the production of the discourse generated about the Circuit, how my status affects what I am allowed to hear, and my role as editor in determining what can or cannot be said. My primary duty is the protection of my sources, which includes the entire community as well as individuals within it. It is incumbent for me to be honest about the strengths and weaknesses of my community, but it is not my job to say anything that could inflict harm any individuals, organizations, or the “scene” itself.

I view my own reflexivity as the means by which I keep my ethical responsibilities. David Hufford says, “A reflexive account of our knowledge-making work can give us a more accurate sense of where we are, because it will always require us to tell how we got there” (Hufford, “The Scholarly Voice and the Personal Voice” 74). But I refuse to tell *everything*. In order to maintain the ethos of respect that I learned in Brazil, I adhere to the *reciprocal ethnography* of Elaine Lawless and its commitment to modify reflexive ethnography away from self-absorption (or, Heaven forbid, putting my people at risk) and to keep a respectful focus on the community. I heed Lawless’ criticism that many of those who engage in reflexivity “are talking about ethnography more than they are doing it”:

My work with these women [Pentecostalist preachers] is reflexive in that I readily acknowledge my presence in the research and the possible and very real effects my presence has on the field experience. And my work is “reciprocal” in that we, the women and I, have established a working dialogue about the material, a reciprocal give and take. This process is not to be understood as reciprocity, where obligation or payment is the motivating factor—but reciprocal, in the (I hope) best sense of sharing and building knowledge based on dialogue and examined/re-examined knowledge...While I fully acknowledge that I am writing this book, I am committed to presenting the work as collaborative, as dialogue, and as emergent, not fixed (*Holy Women, Wholly Women* 61).

I do not apply reflexive ethnography to *all* the groups that are discussed in this work, however. I have not made it a point to seek out soldiers and terrorists (I have, however, spoken with Ravers) to find out what they think of my theories,

methodology, and findings. I use soldiers and terrorists as points of contrast (straw dogs, as it were) concerning outlaw status, masculinity, spirituality, and violence without consulting members of their respective communities.

Nevertheless, I have some credentials for writing about these groups (with the exception of terrorists). I have retroactive insider status as a soldier (United States Marine Corps, graduated from Parris Island on March 17, 1983) and a Raver. But I have never attended a terrorist training center, nor do I correspond or associate with known terrorists. One can only do so much.

Somatic Studies and the problem with music/dance notation

In my understanding of Somatic Studies, I have explored systems of movement, how we learn through our bodies, and that the body reflects the mind as a unity, which Seymour Kleinman calls the body-mind or *soma*.

I was taught by Seymour Kleinman and Bill Taylor that Somatic Studies is much more about *doing* and *being* than theorizing. As such, the methodology that I derive from Somatic Studies involves theoretical flexibility. The goal is to understand a phenomenon by experiencing it and then extrapolate theory from bodies in motion (including my own body) rather than using pre-existing theory to frame performance before observing it.

Somatic Studies focuses on the interrelationships between the physiological and the psychological of the experiencing subject, including the researcher. Thomas Hanna defines it in this way: "The somatic viewpoint encompasses how we individually view ourselves from the inside looking out and how, from that viewpoint, the distinction between mind and body disappears" (*Somatics* 45). It is with this central thesis that an understanding of the body-mind and the body-in-motion in the performance of pleasure are prerequisites for understanding of Circuit spirituality and masculinity that I do the following: 1) I relate the *qualia* (subjective criteria for describing an experience) associated with the pulse of the music as important elements in the production of transcendent solidarity for soldiers, Ravers, and Circuiteers. 2) I examine the effect of certain intoxicants in conjunction with the behavior and outlook of those who take them. 3) I situate sensuality and hilarity in performance as embodied concepts in promoting a sense of community. 4) My research focuses on the lived experience of Circuit DJs, the technicians of sound who use music to move the body-minds of participants, unite them into one socio-somatic body-mind, and generate a form of transcendent solidarity that is unique to the Circuit.

However, I have found it necessary to dispense with almost all references to music and dance notation in my scholarship because such notation ends up

limiting what one can see rather than opening up one's understanding of diverse forms.

A relationship exists between scholarship, aesthetic appreciation, and elitism. Privileging elite forms has historically been a major motivator for the development of notation in Western civilization.

Music and dance notation are relatively recent innovations. For most of human history, music and dance have been passed down from voice to voice and body to body by means of observation and imitation, not formal text-based instruction. Although we may postulate that dance has been with humanity since prehistory, we do not have much evidence telling us exactly how people danced before the 17th century because we do not have texts that describe how they did it.

Before we can theorize about movement, it helps if we have language by which we can describe movement. It would seem, then, that dance and music codified into text would be a good thing. The problem is that, no matter how hard we try, we cannot avoid passing aesthetic judgments, and these judgments end up finding their way into how we describe what we observe. When Rudolf Laban attempted to create a system of universal dance notation, he wished that his project had been done centuries earlier so that we could see how people danced in the past. Historically, however, notation (including Laban's) tends to favor the perspective of the cultural background of its origin.

Early forms of dance notation were not meant to explore movement in its splendid variety, but to teach people how to dance properly, and to restrict dance to styles that the judges of *haute culture* thought were better than other forms. So, right from the beginning, notation came with insistence on conformity to rigid standards. This in turn would lead to the privileging of staged productions (entertainment that not only gives people spectacle, but also teaches them what is aesthetically proper), and the devaluation of folk music and dance that was not deemed worthy of putting on stage.

In Western civilization, standardized musical notation came centuries before dance notation. The transformation of music into abstract text in Western civilization can be traced to the court of Charlemagne during the 9th century CE.¹³ The founder of this early system of notation was said to be Pope Gregory the Great (Knighton 228), an early advocate of centralized papal authority who died in 604 CE some two hundred years earlier. Obviously, the association of music notation with Gregory is historically problematic since there is no evidence of so-called Gregorian notation before the 9th century. The insistence by Charlemagne that Gregory started music notation reflects the collaboration of Church and State at the time. Keep in mind that Pope Leo III (Gregory's spiritual descendant)

¹³ This system did not spring forth full-grown in the 9th century. The use of Gregorian notation is the point, however, where many scholars recognize a functioning system that contained more precise information about the production of music rather than just a series of cues.

crowned Charlemagne emperor, and Charlemagne protected the Pope from invaders. According to Richard Leppert, the crucial issue for Charlemagne in imposing a system of notation was Church-approved conformity in the production of spectacle (in this case, choral performance):

Thus the early history of musical notation, closely tied to the political desire to codify, to establish “universal” norms in the medieval church, must be understood in light of the darker histories the practice embeds. The relation between musical notation and surveillance is closer than the history of aesthetics has preferred to consider. To express this matter still more scandalously, musical notation was developed to give people orders to follow...Thus the inability of many classically trained musicians of our own day to improvise is hardly accidental; indeed, it is planned as a “natural” outgrowth of the felt need to transmit the *fully texted* traditions of canonic practices. The disgust shown in music schools toward nonschool musicians, especially performers of popular music who cannot *read* music, is coin from the same mint (Leppert 133-134).

Association between notation and centralized authority is also evident in dance notation, which began in the court of Louis XIV in the 17th century. Louis considered himself to be above the law as the Sun King, God’s representative on earth, and is supposed to have proclaimed, “L’etat, c’est moi” (“I am the State,” McClain 4). A lover of dance (and, from all reports, quite the dancer himself), Louis held extravagant soirees in which his court would appear in all of its splendor and perform precisely choreographed steps. Like Gregorian music notation, the dance notation of the French royal court was not a comprehensive system designed to describe movement. It was rather a regulatory program for

compliance that set standards for performance in the upper echelons of society. Once codified, courtly dance was easily exportable outside of France by professional dancing masters. As a social marker of the elite, courtly dance was appealing to ambitious commoners who aspired for higher status. Dance became a commodity that, when purchased and properly learned, could bestow upon even the lowest classes the embodied trappings of movement reserved for their superiors.

In the early 20th century, Rudolf Laban would propose a more comprehensive notation system for dance in 1928 that he hoped would be universally applicable. But Laban himself was attracted to strong centralized authority, or at least not repelled by it. During the rise of the Third Reich, Laban lived in Germany and, although not a member of the Nazi Party, he worked with the Nazis, choreographing large-scale dance productions for them. He had a fall from grace with arch-Nazi Joseph Göbbels, however. As Minister for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, Dr. Göbbels felt that Laban's choreography was too intellectual and therefore potentially heretical to Master Race theopolitical dogma. Laban was condemned for allegiance to Freemasonry, and accusations of homosexuality surfaced (Karina and Kant 57-59, 124). Laban was remarkably

apolitical; he left Germany in 1937, because he feared for his life, not because he disagreed with Nazism (Partsch-Bergsohn 92-93).¹⁴

Today, his system of movement notation (called *labanotation*) is associated with scholarly approaches to dance and exercises and the universal siblinghood of all humanity, his initial dalliance with fascism notwithstanding. Labanotation and its academic descendants are easily exported to colleges and universities around the world as proof that dance, especially modern dance, is an academically valid subject by providing dance scholarship with its own emic texts and language for movement.

Dance notation has not, however, been adopted by folk practitioners of popular dance, neither is it a prerequisite for most professional dancers. The necessity for dance notation for professional dancers is apparently not as great as the need for music notation for professional musicians. Many musical artists can read music from the page; it is an advantage to have this training in the job market. Very few dance professionals outside of the university, however, bother with dance notation. It seems that video recordings are more popular means of preserving movement and teaching dance than choreography-as-abstracted-text. I doubt seriously that dance notation will ever move out of the realm of the

¹⁴ Laban said that he had a “humane but socially hostile” view toward homosexuality. He denied all accusations of homosexuality made against him, stating in a farewell letter, “much of the hostility of my own pupils...arose because of my own opposition to such practices” (Karina 58).

scholarly elite, which in turn tends to keep popular dance from being taken seriously by our beloved (and hopelessly elitist) educational system.

Professional dance in the US is learned through an interesting combination of non-notated scholarship and lived experience. People who teach dance for a living can get an education in universities, but learn to dance primarily by apprenticing themselves to living, moving people.

“Feels real” Folklore and the body-mind

Most folklorists I know do their research in a state of immersion in several worlds at once, including their own reflexive world, the world of their scholarly peers, and the world of their *folk*. Their immersion into the world of the folk is an embodied one; it requires physical encounter and mutual performance.

Like dance, the discipline of folklore is based on apprenticeship as well as book-learning and theoretical rumination. Theory, in fact, must reflect lived experience. We learn from our teachers by observing them as well as reading the texts they assign, and we learn one-on-one and one-on-group from our collaborators in the field. We perform together with fellow folklorists in socio-somatic synchronization as we do penance together (attending interminable

lectures, joining committees, reading re-writes of PhD. dissertations) and rejoice together (dancing, eating, drinking, and armchair savanting).

From my experience in academia, I have found that only a few people find pleasure in abstract theory-based texts divorced from experience. To abstract is to reduce, and with theory, reduction means elimination of details, features, flavors, sights, sounds, smells, texture, and movement. I find that scholarship removed from experience has less to do with rigorous intellectual sophistication and more to do with seductive fantasies of scholarly precision and control. We should be aware of the limitations of abstract theory and resist the tendency to consider disembodied exercises to be a higher form of intellectual endeavor. Such theories are appealing to those who get pleasure out of abstraction, not necessarily those who are smarter. Abstraction can be useful, much as it is useful to fly high above a city so that we can see its contours and roadways as a whole. The problem lies when we privilege the view from above over the view from the ground. The city as a distant geographical whole is not the whole city.

I do my research and write up my work in an almost constant state of motion. I am more comfortable as a scholar when I am physically active than when at rest. Margaret Mills' statement, "It may be that we can only experience balance and stability as long as we stay in motion" (Mills 173) is, for me, not a "may be" proposition. It is a prerequisite. As I write this, I am listening to deep

house dance music. My body, for the most part, is still from shoulders down, except for those muscles that are necessary for typing a keyboard and nodding in time to the music. Should a particularly hot song come on the internet radio station, however, I will sway as I type. If it really hits me, I will get up and dance around until my mind resumes some semblance of calm that will render me capable of resuming my work. If the music does not move me at all, however, I will change the station. It is essential to me as a writer that I be moved, at least internally, by music (whether actual or imagined) and/or the subjects of my writing. I do my best work when the music is in sync with the flow of my ideas.

Motion keeps me grounded in lived experience; I cannot privilege theory over experience because I am not sedentary. This does not mean theory-heavy studies are inherently bad or inferior; they simply reflect the desires of those who write them. For me, theory is choreography, a text that must be wedded to people with body-minds in motion if it is to make any sense at all. *My* theoretical assumptions must therefore reflect my love of motion.

I wonder if most abstract theory-driven scholars love quiet as they work. Perhaps it is important for some scholars not to privilege the relationship between thinking, physical activity, and community because that would detract them from diamond-sharp focus. Perhaps they take greater pleasure in being still, in certainty

of place, title, and description, than in flux. The precision necessary for putting things in place, however, does not necessarily put them in sync.

Theoretical language that isolates scholarship from experience tends to be static. It is language fit for those who like to be cognitively still, who value precise vocabulary over movement. In order to nail a concept, one must first hold it in place. I recognize that there is value in doing this, especially for people who get fired up when presented with abstract knowledge-as-text. I appreciate that rarified theory presented in thick, discipline-specific language is hot to those who derive pleasure from static precision. It turns them on. Adroit manipulation of thick language is also a great means by which one may subvert the ideas of others by claiming that “they” lack precision, and then generating the elitist fantasy that “we” have it. I cannot claim that I do not also find pleasure in these things as well, up to a point.

Like many folklorists, I take little pleasure in being in the scholarly caste, especially if this creates barriers between myself and the people about whom I write. The reason I love folklore so much is because those who taught me have made it a point to subvert elitism again and again. But most folklorists (including myself as I write these words) revert back to elitist language when they write because it is a prerequisite for scholarly credibility. If we were allowed to write the way we teach, our texts would be so much better.

Margaret Mills' "feels real" concept in her theory-saturated article, "Feminist Theory and the Study of Folklore," rings true to me:

We need some strong way of addressing the "feels real" aspect of culturally constructed experiences (of gender and other seemingly intractable categories). By "feels real," I mean those experiences which are taken on by the experiencing *subject* as incontestable—conversion experiences, miracles—but I do not wish to label the contents of this "feels real" category as "ideological" in its entirety. While such felt realities seem most tangibly represented not only by religious and supernatural experiences, but also by prejudice in the lives of both perpetrators and their victims, it would be premature to assume the coherency of the category, "feels real" (Mills 179).

But it is precisely the incoherency, the fuzziness (including moral fuzziness) inherent in "feels real," that makes it appealing to me. When taken to an extreme, precision leads to incoherent babble that is decipherable only by the elite who generate and perpetuate such language. The same is true when we adopt a one-right-way moral stance as scholars, or assume that we can piously pronounce judgments on *all* spiritual beliefs from a pseudo-detached, quasi-atheistic, academic secularism with pretensions of objectivity (Hufford, "The Scholarly Voice and the Personal Voice" 60-73). I personally have no problems with ascribing to such academic secularism (I do it all the time!), as long as those who affect such a stance are aware of the fuzziness of their own position. They must realize that the legitimacy of academic secularism lies solely in the possibility that it can act as neutral ground for us to meaningfully communicate

with each other, not as just one more ideological hammer by which we can hit each other on the head.

The questionable coherence and simplicity of “feels real” makes it more readily graspable as a category for dealing with experience, which is inherently fuzzy. Mills’ observation that “feels real” is readily applicable to supernatural and religious experiences would make it useful in understanding spiritual experiences in secular contexts as well, so it is wonderfully applicable to the ecstasy of transcendent solidarity in the sensual, rhythmic, chemically-induced, danced communal bonding found in the Gay men’s Circuit.

Mills gives experience-based examples of “feels real”:

Here, too, critical folklorists have substantial contributions to make to critical studies, for it is through folklife studies, in particular, belief studies, that there is some chance of conceptualizing what “feels real” (pain, marginalization, the intransigence of prejudice both as suffered and as thought), over against the tendency of postmodern intellectualism to reduce all thought to situated hallucination (Mills 185).

I would ask, however, that joy, frivolity, hilarity, and solidarity be included as feels-real categories. And, of course, let us include the embodied movement that accompanies experience.

Performance theory as movement

In order to analyze my research on the Circuit as lived experience, I have taken recourse to performance theory as my main focus. In a wonderful blend of Queer theory sensibilities (the article is entitled “Performance Trouble,” a nod to Butler’s *Gender Trouble* quoted earlier), Foucaultian critical analysis of power, and Somatic Studies-esque resistance to the supremacy of theory over experience, Della Pollock describes performance theory:

An empirical or even narrowly interpretive approach to the world may rest relatively comfortably with theory as a meta-narrative, as an explanatory thread around the object-world. Performance won’t stand still long enough for theory to wrap it up nicely. It moves in time and space through restless bodies. To track its contingencies, to plumb its affective depths and to discover the power of its rough currents, thinking about performance must move as well. In these essays, we see and feel theory as something like a collaborator with performance, a cosubject however uncomfortably removed from the stability of a subject/object relation. In embodied relation to performance, theory moves...I would thus have to call performance-and-theory a project of interanimation; of discerning how many more vital possibilities (for performance, for theory, for the world) are wrought by the transactivity of performance and various ways of imagining it (Pollock 1).

I take my cues concerning performance primarily from four scholars: Catherine Bell (ritual as performance), Richard Baum (the performance frame), Irving Goffman (understanding performer, audience, and team), and Mark Juergensmeyer (terrorism as performance). In the chapter entitled “The Circuit as

Ecstatic Ritual,” I discuss the production of transcendent solidarity as being performed within a ritual frame by performers who are simultaneously audience. I then compare the Circuit’s secular spiritual performance of transcendent solidarity as a core experience shared with religious terrorists by examining Juergensmeyer’s analysis of acts of terrorism as cosmic performance. The nonviolent, more ethical expression of outlaw masculine excess and transgression found in the Circuit is contrasted with a violent, less ethical expression (religious terrorism) and an ethically neutral one (the military). Since my work is unabashedly teleological with the avowed purpose of legitimizing my folk, affirming the ethics of the Circuit over the ethics of terrorism is *the* crucial issue of my research.

Spirituality and Religion

I also define “spirituality” and “religion” as a spectrum of possibilities, not as opposites. *Spirituality* is a personal relationship between human beings and the universe, the authority that governs the universe, and/or their own being in relationship to the basis for all existence. *Religion* is a codification of that relationship.

My definitions are similar to those of Robert C. Fuller in his work, *Spiritual, but Not Religious*, concerning what he calls “unchurched people.”

Fuller says that there is a significant group of Americans who define themselves as spiritual without subscribing to any religious denomination:

They feel a tension between their personal spirituality and membership in a conventional religious organization. Most of them value curiosity, intellectual freedom, and an experimental approach to religion. They often find established religious institutions stifling...Genuine spirituality, they believe, has to do with personal efforts to achieve greater harmony with the sacred. For them, spirituality has to do with private reflection and private experience, not public ritual (Fuller 4).

I differ from Fuller, however, in that I see *all* ritual as potentially spiritual in that ritual is grounded in dramatic encounter with the cosmos (further discussion of ritual can be found in Chapter 12, “Stepping Out”).

Although many people these days claim to be spiritual but not religious, I would rather put the two terms in relation to each other rather than some kind of opposition. Instead of asking if something is either spiritual or religious, my questions would be how spiritual or religious it is in terms of quality and degree. I seek to determine how it connects humans intimately with the cosmos, the intensity of the connection, and to what degree the connection has been standardized.

I also seek to bridge the gap between the secular and the spiritual, between Durkheim’s *effervescence* as a strictly collective phenomenon triggered by group

dynamics and emic claims such a phenomenon is transcendent beyond the group that performs and experiences it. I suggest that we as scholars can take such emic claims seriously. We can stand on middle ground; these spiritual experiences need not be explained away as purely secular in opposition to the spiritual. We can frame unchurched rituals of collective effervescence as secular and spiritual without necessarily having to certify their spiritual efficacy.

Labels

In accordance with the protocol used by many Deaf activists and scholars, certain words are capitalized to indicate community affiliation. The word “deaf” refers to a condition, while “Deaf” refers to community and/or culture (Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy* xiv). I apply this protocol to “Straight,” “Gay,” “Queer,” “Lesbian,” “Bear,” “Leather,” “Black,” “White,” “Circuit,” “Circuiteer,” “Rave,” and “Raver.” When not capitalized, “straight” is “noncurving,” “gay” means “happy,” “circuit” is a route or electronic component, “leather” is treated animal skin, “black” and “white” are colors, “bear” is a mammal from the family *Ursidae*, etc. The words “homosexual” and “heterosexual” are sexual orientations, not communities, so they are not routinely capitalized.

What can and cannot be said

I am a participant-observer who has been to over sixty Circuit events across North America since 1998. I have spoken with DJs, promoters, doctors, law enforcement officers, and hundreds of Circuit boys and girls from across the US and Canada. Along with my own ethnographic observations and interviews (conducted in 2002-2003), my husband and I have worked on the production of Circuit parties as well.

As a trusted insider, I must watch what I write. The Circuit's bad reputation (which has parallels in the other communities that make up underground house culture) presents me with certain ethical dilemmas that I have resolved in favor of the safety of my collaborators. I will attribute nothing concerning illegal drug use or unsafe sexual practices that can be traced to the actions of an identifiable person. Protection of my individual sources on these topics is assured at all times. I will, however, refer to some published reports that give facts and figures concerning intoxicant use and sex.

Professional detachment is a necessary requirement in conducting empirical research; that same detachment on my part would render me less effective in gaining the confidence of my collaborators. If I were to present myself to the community during a Circuit weekend with the trappings of research,

such as a clipboard with anonymous surveys, then I would mark myself as separate from the participants in ways that would at the very least appear absurd and at most threatening. I cannot get the kind of personal experience-based data I desire unless I am accepted as a member of the community who values the safety of its members more than my own research.

As anyone who has worked with outlaw communities knows, empirical research methods can distort the results precisely because there is always the possibility that information can be traced back to its sources, no matter how careful the researcher. Our collaborators may tailor their responses to protect themselves from those who read our research, including people in law enforcement. In other words, our sources have plenty of incentive to lie to us.

Empirical studies of the Circuit community face other challenges. Equally difficult can be answers to the most basic questions because such answers can cause legal problems for event promoters. Here are three examples: 1) sound levels, 2) the number of people attending an event, and 3) the number of people treated for health problems.¹⁵

1) Attempts to gauge sound levels at events are often met with consternation from venue owners. Accurate measurements in sound volume

¹⁵ I am not in the position to cite my sources for these illustrations because they come from professionals who are quite involved in the scene. It could compromise their reputations and effectiveness in the community if they were identified.

might indicate that the venue exceeded legal standards. This could result in fines and even worse punishments from municipal authorities. The problem many club owners face: legal volume levels are considered by a significant number of their clientele to be woefully inadequate. I am morally obliged not to verify or deny this assumption by actually measuring sound levels. It is not acceptable for anyone in the scene, especially a trusted insider such as myself, to generate data proving that venues do not conform to community standards.

This issue has to do with large dance venues in general, not just Gay venues. The sophistication of music technology at upper-end Gay and Straight clubs is phenomenal. There are sound systems that can fill the room with high levels of bass and midrange without causing discomfort to the listener. One can stand near a giant speaker, yet hold a conversation with one's friends. This technology has been created in response to the participants' desire to feel the music with their entire body, not just hear it in their ears.

This technology renders legal definitions as to what is too loud obsolete. Unfortunately, what is on the law books is not always in sync with what is *avant-garde*. Once Circuiteers get a taste of good sound from state-of-the-art sound systems, lower volumes from less sophisticated systems no longer seem adequate. Promoters do not want to choose between pleasing their clientele or obeying the

letter of the law, so there is no zealous movement in the dance community or among club owners to monitor sound levels.

2) The number of people at any party is equally difficult to determine due to concerns of some event producers about two possibilities: 1) dwindling numbers of participants, and 2) an abundance of participants. If the numbers reflect a decline, it would be bad press to report that a party was less successful than it had been in the past. This could damage its reputation as a popular event. On the other hand, it is often impossible to tell if a venue will be too small because many participants will wait until the last minute to buy their tickets.¹⁶

One interesting phenomenon about Gay male dance venues is that, on average, it appears that they can hold more people than a Straight dance venue of the same size. This may be due to the ease with which Gay men touch each other and the lack of offense taken when somebody accidentally brushes against another person. As a consequence, Gay men tend not to hold to the same standards as Straight people as to what would be considered overcrowding.

Circuit boys are only happy when a venue is filled to the rafters. They also want to be in the same room as the DJ, preferably within eyesight. Once again, there is a discrepancy between what participants desire and what the law allows.

¹⁶ Gulf Coast promoter Johnny Chisholm told me that his organization had figured out ways to determine if overcrowding would be an issue well before the night of the party, and would stop ticket sales before the numbers got out of hand (interview, February 2007).

This discrepancy can put party promoters in an awkward situation of trying to please their customers and keeping their events legal.

There have been events in the past that sold more tickets than the venue could legally hold, and attendees with tickets were turned away at the door. The most notorious example of this occurred in 2002 when approximately one quarter to one third of attendees were denied entrance to a major Circuit event during Gay Days in Orlando, Florida. The problem arose due to a technicality: the space in which the event took place was theoretically large enough for everyone. But the dance floor was only a portion of that space—there were multiple areas that were separate from the dance floor environment.

As mentioned before, Circuiteers wants to be together *en masse* in the dance floor area. Authorities at the event in Orlando saw for themselves that the dance floor had become overcrowded and decided that more people would pose a safety hazard, even though other areas of the rented space still had plenty of room. Reasoning (correctly, I might add) that more participants would only continue to squeeze into the dance area, they stopped any further admission well before everyone could get in. This led to mass confusion and much bitterness for those left outside.

Similar stories are told about ticket holders being turned away from an International Male Leather event in Chicago (2002) and denied admittance to a

Toronto Pride main event dance floor (2004). I attended the Toronto Pride event, and I can attest to the wisdom of the authorities when they limited the numbers in what was quickly becoming a dangerously overcrowded space.

In none of the above instances do I fault the promoters and staff. Putting on a Circuit party involves walking a thin line between too few and too many participants. I have, however, witnessed events where unscrupulous managers and club owners turned a blind eye to public safety in favor of profit. I have left events early, disgusted, because the crowd was packed in beyond any semblance of reason. I feared for my safety and the safety of my husband. Had there been a fire, people would surely have died. Another dangerous tactic is to turn off the air conditioning or even turn on the heat in an already overheated venue, and then shut off water to sinks in the bathrooms. This is done to increase drink sales.¹⁷

3) Perhaps the most sensitive issue is the number of people who need medical attention during an event. Since the vast majority of health problems have to do with illegal drug overdose, especially GHB, promoters are afraid that too

¹⁷ Fortunately, the overwhelming majority of Circuit promoters are ethical people who care about participants. Having experienced for myself the headaches that come with throwing an event, I have great respect and even awe for the people behind the scenes.

many ambulance calls will bring the scrutiny of law enforcement officers. This could lead authorities to shut down the venue.¹⁸

It is important to note that the problems Gay male dance venues have with intoxicant overdose are matched and (in my opinion) exceeded by the health problems that Straight venues have with intoxicant overdose and violence. In the average Straight club, it is acceptable to have people puking in the stalls and fighting because alcohol and violence have been normalized, especially for men. However, Gay dance clubs are in danger of being stigmatized because of the intoxicants of choice, in spite of the fact that there are far fewer people hospitalized or killed due to fighting. It does not help that two “club drugs,” GHB and ketamine, have been reported in Straight clubs as “date rape” drugs, something that I have never heard in the Circuit. What amazes me is that the Straight community has yet to recognize that the most popular “date rape” drug of all is alcohol.

It is not my job as a scholar to ensure that laws are enforced. I do not wish to lose the confidence of my professional sources that actually put the events together, so I do not attempt to measure the wrong things. My standing as a

¹⁸ The problem of excessive overdoses during a party has been greatly reduced since 2003 with the work that promoters and the volunteer organization of medical personnel called MedEvent have done in raising awareness and providing help during parties. I go into detail about this in the chapter called “Harm Reduction.”

trusted insider would disappear if I showed up with a sound meter, pushed employees for accurate participant numbers, or made a chart of ambulance runs from their venues. I leave such tactics for other, more aggressive, scholars.

Outlining a study of fascists and whores

“Part I: The Circuit” is an overview of the Circuit with two chapters. The first, “The Circuit: The Few, the Proud, the Cracked” is a general survey of the Circuit community. The second chapter, “Thousands of Dancing Gay Men,” examines popular dance and the Circuit as an outlaw community that is ironically protected by homophobia.

“Part II: Roots” gives some of the historical background in which the Circuit arose. It is made up of four short histories derived from the discourse on each subject in the manner of Michel Foucault’s “archaeology of ideas.”

“Homosexuality” examines the importance of festivals in the formation of Gay communities and the consequential reactions to erase the celebratory voices of homosexuals up to the Stonewall Awakening of 1969. “The Circuit(s)” examines the formation of Circuit culture within the history of Gay men from 1969 to the present, including the appearance of more than one Circuit.

The chapter entitled “Popular Communal Dance” has three parts. The first part examines the way that non-formal dance has changed the social landscape in America over the last 240 years. The second part illustrates how changes in post-Stonewall Gay dance culture would eventually result in the communal rhythmic movement peculiar to the Circuit community. The third part describes what Circuiteers do on the dance floor.

Because of the importance of African American music on Circuit culture, I added “African/African American Musical Roots.” This chapter also shows how gospel-inspired music and ritual music taken from African religion add religious flavor to the secular performance of dance in the Circuit.

“Part III: The Body-Mind” is dedicated to the analysis of the corporate *soma* or body-mind of the Circuit community and the core experience of transcendent solidarity, which, in the context of the Circuit, is danced into existence as a comical-spiritual ritual of nonviolent masculinity.

“Pulse: From Marching Soldier to Dancing Queen” examines how moving to rhythm is a common feature of both the military and the Circuit in molding men into a unified corps, and how this unity encourages certain outlaw behaviors specific to that corps. It further analyzes the more intricate rhythmic structures in Circuit music in the generation of heightened pleasure and intense group solidarity. “Fierce” further examines the role of the body, sexual orientation, and

the establishment of new cultural norms in the production of the Circuit's nonviolent masculinity.

The next three chapters are less theoretical and more ethnographic in terms of anthropological and folkloric research. "The DJ" examines the role of the DJ in the metaphors that they use for themselves: guide, lover, teacher, and cook. "The Girlfriends" gives a brief history and description (both emic and etic) of each of the four major "club drugs" found in the Circuit. "Harm Reduction" looks at the responses made by medical personnel and activists for responsible behavior within the Circuit community regarding drug abuse by participants.

"Part IV: The Soul" examines how spirituality and ethics produced by its proponents and its detractors inform the discourse of the Circuit.

I felt it necessary to first situate the topics of spirituality and ethics within a larger context of the core experience outside of the Circuit. "Stepping Out" compares the spiritual dimensions of military solidarity and religious terrorism with the spiritual solidarity of the Circuit. "The Ethics of Pleasure" offers discourse analysis of Circuit ethics by examining articles taken from the Circuit's major quarterly publication, *Circuit Noize*. "Tribe" critically examines beliefs held by some in the Circuit community that Circuit parties are shamanic rituals and that the Circuit community is a tribe.

“Appendix: Notes from the Field” is a compilation of articles about two key geographic locations: Manhattan and Fire Island, an analysis of sexuality/gender, and two Circuit parties: Philadelphia Blue Ball and Montreal Black and Blue.

Wordplay

Although my research will not focus on quantitative data dealing with the interesting but scandalous issues of sex and drugs, I will not refrain from reporting on scandalous language. As a member of the Gay community and the Circuit community, I will be using many terms that insiders use among themselves and I will be discussing topics that insiders commonly discuss. As much as possible, I want to invite the reader into the rich verbal wordplay of Circuit expressive culture. Some of these terms and topics (including drug use and sex) might make some people uncomfortable. I may, for example, refer to other Gay men as "fags," a term that is rejected in polite Straight society but is a frequently used term of endearment in Gay circles. If this is offensive, I apologize.

PART I THE CIRCUIT

CHAPTER 1

THE CIRCUIT: THE FEW, THE PROUD, THE CRACKED

The carnivalesque crowd...is not merely a crowd.
It is the people as a whole, but organized in *their own way*,
the way of the people. It is outside of and contrary to all
existing forms of the coercive socioeconomic and political
organization, which is suspended for the time of the festivity.

This festive organization of the crowd must be first of all
concrete and sensual. Even the pressing throng,
the physical contact of bodies, acquires a certain meaning.
The individual feels that he is an indissoluble
part of the collectivity, a member of the people's mass body.

Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 255

The Circuit is a series of large-scale annual dance parties (from 1,000 to 15,000 participants) that are usually held over a weekend in major urban centers and repeated annually. Circuit parties provide venues where thousands of shirtless men get wasted, flirt, and dance in large numbers with little or no violence. The Circuit creates an intimate public space where muscle is privileged, intoxication is the norm, and sex is usually limited to what a man can do with his pants on while dancing. Aggression is limited as well; participants rarely attack each other with anything other than dirty looks and rude remarks.

Some of the most popular Circuit parties are in their second decade and have acquired the aura of established tradition. Some cities officially welcome Circuiteers and put up banners during the bigger party weekends, such as Palm Springs (White Party¹⁹), Montreal (Black and Blue), and South Beach (White Party, Winter Party).

The Circuit community is a loose-knit, transregional association of men and women from many walks of life. Circuit participants make up an urban nomadic community of revelers that reconstitutes itself for a few days and then disperses until the next Circuit party. In addition to the movement of bodies on the dance floor, there is also the movement of people from city to city and country to country. Circuit culture has been exported to Mexico, Britain, Australia, Holland, France, Brazil, Israel, South Africa, Taiwan, Thailand, and Malaysia.

Theoretically, the Circuit community is inclusive. Anyone can attend. There are no membership requirements per sé concerning sexual preference, race, age (besides being over the age of eighteen), or appearance. One need not dance well or even walk. I have witnessed people dancing in wheelchairs at Circuit events.

¹⁹ In 2004, openly Gay mayor Ron Oden officially welcomed participants to Palm Springs for the White Party, and renamed the park that had held the White Party Sunday tea dance the “White Party Park.” An official welcoming ceremony from Mayor Oden for both the White Party and its Lesbian equivalent, the Dinah Shore Weekend is now an annual occurrence.

The Circuit is not for everyone, however.

Circuit parties tend to be expensive. Event tickets for the weekend range from \$100 to \$600. A Circuit weekend can cost each participant an average of \$1200 after costs for entrance fees, hotel, travel, food, and intoxicants are tabulated. An estimated 200,000 Gay men worldwide participate in Circuit parties (Nimmons 157), so net expenditure would be somewhere around \$240,000,000 per annum. This gives the Circuit community economic clout: some businesses cater to it, including hotels, airlines, clothing designers, and CD manufacturers.²⁰ Around the world, the Circuit is growing. I project that it will be only a few years before net spending doubles.

The average American Circuit boy is a White or Hispanic Gay male between the ages of 21 and 55 with some college education. Income level is between \$20,000-\$100,000 annually.²¹ In terms of physique, most Circuiteers are

²⁰ Many people who deal with the business end of the Circuit are reluctant to give actual dollar amounts raised by their parties. My numbers are an educated guess, made in consultation with industry professionals, and based upon the birth of new parties, death of old ones, and a new phenomenon: the rebirth of a few dead parties. Since 2001, numbers have dropped dramatically. There appears, however, to be a rebound since 2004-5 as well as a growing international Circuit scene outside of the US and Canada.

²¹ Averages are based on my own observations of the Circuit and conversations with promoters and are similar to those of Masergh et al and Mattison et al. The Masergh survey (295 participants in San Francisco) is more restricted in age range (78% between 25-39 yrs. of age) but concurs with me in that 70% are white, 91% have an education past high school, and 79% have an annual income between

of average build, although there is a large and cherished minority of men (around 25 percent) who have exceptionally muscular physiques.

Circuit parties are all about dancing. At the bigger events, it is possible to dance from 10 pm Friday until 2 am Tuesday. Music, clothing, staged performances, venue design and decoration, and technologies for lights and sound are tailored to encourage participants to dance and to unify the crowd into a single pulsing entity. Special preparations that participants undergo in terms of physical fitness, personal grooming, and choice of intoxicants are meant to enhance the performance of self.

The premium placed on performance can be unnerving. Most participants attend the events in protective clusters of friends and lovers. Much of the networking in the Circuit is interaction between small groups, which engage in forming new friendships and alliances over the weekend. Participants congregate in specific places between events (usually around the host hotel), transforming these places into safe havens by sheer force of numbers where men may hold

\$20,000-\$100,000 (955). The Mattison survey (1169 participants from across the country) differs somewhat from Masergh in terms of categories: 76% Caucasian, 68% with a BA or higher, and 50% with an annual income of \$50,000 or more (122). Both give an almost identical median age: 32 years (Masergh) and 33.5 years (Mattison).

hands, kiss, and let down their guard. If these places are already "Gay ghettos," they become even more so for the weekend.²²

Codes for dress and grooming reflect the kind of Circuit event it is. For those that are not designated for a specific group, the rules are fairly simple. Most men have short hair and smooth-shaved faces. They eliminate or trim chest, back, and neck hair. Although there can be a broad range in clothing options (parties may have themes for costumes), a universally accepted outfit is blue jeans and a white sleeveless undershirt (known in the community as a "wife beater"). Boots or athletic shoes are standard footgear. Shirts are usually removed after dancing starts in earnest.

For those Circuit events that cater to Bears (Gay men who celebrate being gentler, heavier, and hairier) and Leathermen (Gay men who mark themselves as sado-masochistic participants by wearing black leather clothing), the rules for grooming are not so stringent. Clothing at Leather events usually features lots of leather and chrome accessories. The Circuit tendency to privilege the perfect physique, haircut, tan, and facial features is less pronounced.

²² Usually a protective social bubble envelops these areas and most homophobes tend to avoid them. Lately, however, homophobic Christian organizations have been invading some of these spaces (such as Gay Days at Disney World in Orlando and New Orleans Southern Decadence in 2003-2005) in order to protest the moral laxity that comes with the revival of Sodom.

Straight women, men of African and Asian descent,²³ men over 60, and drag queens are typically present at Circuit events. Lesbians and Straight men can be found as well, but in even fewer numbers.²⁴

Circuit parties tend to be theme parties. The White Parties, for example, usually inspire attendees to dress in white. Themes often feature fantasy settings and may have spiritual references. The theme for the Philadelphia Blue Ball 2004, for example, was “Ascension,” and Chicago Fireball 2003 featured a live gospel choir. Perhaps the most moving use of spiritual symbolism was during Montreal’s Black and Blue 2000, when participants walked with candles through a giant candlelit red AIDS ribbon.

Participants maintain communal ties by means of Circuit-based literature and computer sites that help them keep up with the music, the DJs, and each other between parties. Virtual communities exist by means of list serves and message boards.²⁵ There is a quarterly magazine and website dedicated to the Circuit,

²³ There has been a significant rise in the number of Asian and Latino men joining the Circuit community. In some areas of the country, these groups may no longer be properly called minorities.

²⁴ Some Circuit parties have separate events for women. The Dinah Shore Golf Classic, which is held in Palm Springs a week before the Palm Springs White Party at the same host hotel (the Wyndam) is arguably a women’s Circuit party. I have also noticed more Lesbians attending the main events as well.

²⁵ Party List, Just Circuit, Circuit Party Insanity, and Circuit Life are some of the more popular list serves and web sources of information.

recently rechristened *noiZe* (formerly *Circuit Noize*), which has articles about the scene as well as a calendar of upcoming events.²⁶

Preferred intoxicants include a range of recreational drugs, the most popular being MDMA (also known as ecstasy, X, or E), Ketamine (K), GHB (G), crystal methamphetamine (crystal), tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana. Due to legal prohibitions against most of these substances, it is impossible to accurately determine how many participants take which drugs.

Participants often refer to themselves as a tribe; some describe their experiences of transcendental solidarity in shamanistic terms. The parties, they say, bond people together by putting them in touch with what they perceive as primeval spiritual feelings. They subscribe to the following *mythos*: human beings have accessed such feelings across the world through intoxication and ecstatic dance since the dawn of time. The Circuit is but a recent version of cosmic tribal

²⁶ The change of name is indicative of the downsizing of the Circuit in the last few years and the pressure on Circuit-based businesses to find new sources of revenue. As an outlaw community, there are plenty of male participants who would not identify themselves as “Circuit boys” or want a magazine with the word “Circuit” in the title because of the stigma attached to the name, and the shift from *Circuit Noize* to *noiZe* reflects these same sentiments. On the other hand, a new online publication called *Edge* has a permanent section entitled “Circuit Parties,” reflecting the recent upswing in the scene’s popularity.

solidarity. Within this transcendental context, some participants find that the Circuit is also a site for the living to bond with the dead.²⁷

Male members of the Circuit community are often referred to as "Circuit boys," a term that is not necessarily a compliment. In the spirit of playfulness that the community possesses in abundance, participants exaggerate their own outlaw identity and fondly refer to each other as "crack whores" or "cracked-out Circuit queens."²⁸ Well-built men are called "muscle Marys." Illegal substances are given "girl" names as well, such as "Stacy" (MDMA or ecstasy), "Tina" (from "Christina" for crystal methamphetamine), "Katie" (Ketamine), and "Gina" (GHB). The necessity for discretion in obtaining, ingesting, and talking about these substances tends to bond the community even closer.

There is a symbiotic relationship between the Circuit and the club scene. Circuit culture is best understood as an inseparable, intensified extension of Gay men's club culture. In many ways, a Circuit party is a night of clubbing writ large: more hours on the dance floor, more people, bigger spectacle, better music. Most Gay male dance venues play "Circuit music" as well as Top 40 dance music, and

²⁷ *Flaggers*, dancers who artfully wave large pieces of colorful cloth, are considered by many to be the most spiritual side of the Circuit. Usually an individual activity. It often puts the flagger into deeply introspective states. Some claim to encounter the dearly departed while flagging.

²⁸ "Cracked-out" is street slang for being intoxicated on illegal drugs to the point of losing self-control. "Cracked-out" or "cracked" is synonymous with "messy" and, to a lesser degree, "tweaked."

the most *avant-garde* clubs introduce new music that will then be played at Circuit parties. On holiday weekends in major cities, it is sometimes difficult to tell the difference between the holiday festival club scene and the Circuit scene.

Circuit music consists of house music between 125-135 BPM (beats per minute), about the pace of a brisk walk. Popular songs are often remixed so that a 3-minute tune is stretched out for 6-10 minutes, a strong percussive backdrop is inserted, and “synth stabs” (strong blasts of synthesized riffs) play off the central melody. A lot of Circuit music comes from remixes made by Circuit DJs.

Circuit DJs perform at clubs as “resident DJs” between Circuit events. The two scenes are also geographically and economically interdependent: when a city hosts a Circuit weekend, most of the parties besides the main events are held in local clubs.

The Circuit has a well-established commercial side. CDs featuring the songs *du jour* on them mixed by popular DJs are on sale at the bigger parties. There are usually host hotels and airlines that are advertised in promotional materials. T-shirts of the event can be purchased or are provided in gift bags for those who pay more for VIP tickets. VIP status also includes the luxury of skipping long lines to get into the venues, and admission into a VIP lounge.

Cherished outsiders and cheerleaders: performance artists, box dancers, and flaggers

Within the performance space of the Circuit, there are places where individuals can remove themselves from the crowd and perform on a stage or raised platform. There are three standard performance genres for those who wish to be removed from the masses, yet still remain a part of the event.

One of the traditions to come out of Circuit culture is the *performance artist*, a rather vague term that refers to a peculiar incarnation of drag from the Gay male African American community. Performance artists are usually African American men who shave their heads, incorporate elements of drag in their costumes, and perform in the middle of Circuit parties by lip-sync-ing current songs. Performance artist numbers often include choreographed routines with well-muscled back-up dancers and dazzling props. But their greatest talent is *fierceness*, the performance of outrageous self-affirmation.

Performance artist routines are popular in the Circuit, a rather odd phenomenon considering that the usual focus of performance is on the dance floor, not the stage. Their appeal is due to several factors:

- 1) Performance artists get attention by sheer audacity. They flout the usual prerequisites for attention, namely, lots of muscle and butch masculine expression.
- 2) The shaved head and dancer's physique present a hardened femininity that is fascinating to watch, especially when framed by an eye-catching costume.
- 3) Every performance artist that I have seen is a superb dancer who can grab the crowd and energize it with smooth, aggressive movements that resonate with the bodies of participants.
- 4) Regardless of whether they are sexually attracted to people of color, the vast majority of Circuiteers are attracted to Blackness. Since most performance artists are African American, they evoke the admiration that Circuiteers have for the Black Diva as a human being who will not be held down.
- 5) Performance artists rarely interrupt the flow of the music. Most of their sets are the length of a song, just long enough to give participants on the dance floor a short break.

Many of these artists, such as Kitty Meow, Power Infiniti, and Kevin Aviance, have achieved legendary status within the Circuit community. They maintain a striking position as outsiders from the mainstream, insiders belonging with the select group of DJs and promoters who run the parties, and folk stars held in high esteem by the majority of Circuiteers. They may also continue the drag

tradition of “houses,” that is, familial connections and obligations with up-and-coming young drag queens who trace their lineage to that particular performance artist.

One prominent feature of Gay men’s dance clubs is the democratization of the dance box. Originally intended for professional performers like go-go dancers,²⁹ boxes have become spaces that are open to anyone with enough nerve to dance upon them in front of everyone else.

This fits nicely with the basic democratic ethic of the Circuit, in which the dance floor is a grand stage in which the participants are the premier performers. But the dance floor is also a meritocracy. Not everyone will get the same reaction when they step up on the box. The better the dancers’ coordination, the greater the variety of moves, and the energy that the dancers bring to the box can make a difference as to how the people below them will receive them. And, of course, a muscular body and good looks do not hurt.

When a participant gets on the box, it is a chance to do two things: to feel the energy of the crowd as a whole, and to impress people with one’s dancing skills. There are exhibitionistic pleasures to be had on the box, including a profound altered state that overcomes dancers when, in front of everyone, they

²⁹ Go-go boys are hired for certain events, and, strictly speaking, are box dancers. Most go-go boys are also Circuit boys; they can blend seamlessly into the crowd as regular participants once their dance shift is done.

become the music. This occurs when the dancer's body is no longer moving *to* the music, but is moved *by* it and then merges *with* it. The dancer experiences a form of *ex stasis* in which the consciousness stands outside of the body and watches it go. The feeling is indescribably good. When this happens on the box, the dancer may also merge with the crowd in a symbiotic relationship; the pleasure of the crowd witnessing the ecstasy of the dancer sends the dancer into even higher levels of pleasure. Ecstasy is best when it is shared. Should the dancer have the presence of mind to give that energy right back to the crowd, everyone benefits. These moments are necessarily short-lived because the attention of the crowd is rarely fixed in unison on any one target unless a professional performance is going on. Even then, the performance (be it box dancer, performance artist, or Circuit diva) better be top-notch and short, between ten and fifteen minutes.

It is common for box dancers to dance in pairs on a box. Occasionally, a couple will push the envelope and mimic sex acts to the pulse of the music, but usually in a humorous fashion and, once again, only for a short time.

Flaggers are, for the most part, unpaid performers who wave and swirl large squares of cloth around themselves. They are a distinct tribe within the Circuit community. Many of them make their own flags, which are usually bright, colorful fabric and are weighted from corner to corner on one side with small metal pellets so that the cloths open up as they are waved. Flaggers learn their

craft from more seasoned practitioners, thus continuing a tradition that goes back to the early Manhattan-Fire Island Circuit of the 1970s.

Most flagging is solo performance that requires about ten times the space of the average dancer. Flaggers need the space in order not to hit others with their weighted flags (which can seriously hurt), so they usually go on stage or on a box. Most of them are older men, although there are plenty of younger enthusiasts among them.

Occasionally, there are conflicts between flaggers and box dancers. If there is only limited space, tensions can increase between them. Unlike most box dancers, flagging tends to be as introverted as it is exhibitionistic, a means for personal meditation as well as being visually interesting to observers. As such, some flaggers may consider what they do to be more important than somebody just dancing on the box, and they expect box dancers to get out of their way. On the other hand, box dancers may feel wronged by a flagger who might take up the space of multiple box dancers on hotly-contested performance real estate. If the flagger performs at the edge of a box or stage, the “danger zone” for other participants includes a few feet in front of them, thus becoming an imposition on the dance floor crowd.

Most flaggers, however, are conscious of the feelings of others. They only unfurl their flags when there is enough room without imposing on anyone. Some

events will set aside areas specifically for flaggers in advance. The best of the flagging tribe will welcome box dancers and share space with them, even incorporating them into the flagging performance with quite beautiful results. A skilled flagger can bathe a box dancer with the soft, flowing fabric when the two move in sync.

As mentioned earlier, flagging may carry spiritual significance for the flagger. The fluid motions of flag dancing, the softness of the fabric as it carresses the skin, the interplay of light, music, and movement create a distinctly different vibration than that enjoyed by the box dancer or participants on the dance floor. Part of that difference includes a significant reduction in sexual expression; one cannot engage in the usual Circuit boy shenanigans of multiple intertwining bodies pressed crotch-to-crotch when one flags.

Trouble in paradise

The Circuit has its share of problems. The money that can be made on a Circuit weekend can lead to nasty competition among a city's Gay dance clubs to bring revelers to various alternative events and afterhours. Big party promoters will occasionally go head-to-head and plan large-scale events that occur at the same time. Too often, this competition waters the crowd down by splitting it up. It

disturbs the underlying sense of solidarity that Circuiteers expect from the experience.

Forgery has also been a problem. Since main events are between \$50-\$100, and weekend passes can go for as much as \$600, forged passes can seriously cut into profits. I know of two instances where promoters lost significant amounts of money due to fake tickets. One involved participants in the Hotlanta River Expo who illegally printed up weekend passes and sold them at a greatly reduced price. The other was at White Party-Palm Springs, where I witnessed a man and his friends bragging about making VIP weekend passes for themselves.

Members of the Circuit community refer to a pervasive attitude of body fascism, the obsession with physical perfection and the snobbery that comes with it. "Body fascism" is a term that members of the Circuit community use to critique themselves. It has since been adopted by the Gay male community in general, and is synonymous in some circles with "Circuit boy."

Substance abuse plagues the community. A couple of years ago, it was not uncommon to see comatose Circuiteers carted away on ambulances and hospitalized by the dozen because of irresponsible GHB use. Circuit parties also have a reputation for being hotbeds for irresponsible behavior leading to HIV transmission and AIDS.

In response to these health issues, concerned members of the community have conducted campaigns for safer sex and intoxicant harm reduction during Circuit weekends. Dr. Chris Mann of Dallas, Texas leads a volunteer organization (MedEvent) of doctors and nurses who work at events to reduce health risks.³⁰ Chicago Fireball held health summits and educational programs during the weekend, a tradition still carried on by Montreal Black and Blue. Pamphlets and posters are present at many Circuit parties that remind participants to party responsibly. Many of the campaigns have considerable marketing savvy, using eye-catching models and outrageous humor to bring home the message.³¹

In addition to safer-sex and harm reduction campaigns, many parties raise funds for Gay causes, especially for AIDS charities. Many of the bigger parties, such as Philadelphia Blue Ball, DC Cherry Party, Miami Winter and White

³⁰ MedEvent personnel are all licensed in the medical field as doctors, nurses, and EMTs who have been in the Circuit scene and are familiar with the ever-expanding range of intoxicants and combinations that Gay men concoct. MedEvent has state-of-the-art protocols for dealing with parties that are, in many cases, superior to the standard practices of local health care workers. Local EMS personnel who are unfamiliar with the scene have been known to misdiagnose problems of Gay male patients, be it GHB-caused seizures or HIV medication complications. In 2003, MedEvent sponsored its first hepatitis vaccine parties in Dallas and Montreal, thus expanding its mission in prevention of diseases.

³¹ Three parties of note in the production of harm reduction advertisements are Philadelphia Blue Ball, Chicago Fireball, and Montreal Black and Blue.

Parties, Montreal Black and Blue, Gay Days-Orlando, New Orleans Halloween,³² and Toronto Pride events donate a portion of their revenue to charities. This practice has created some controversy; some critics say that throwing parties that encourage irresponsible sexual behavior and then claiming that these parties are AIDS fundraisers is the height of hypocrisy (Signorile 118-127).

This has led some parties to no longer distribute pamphlets or put up posters advising participants to party safely. They fear that harm reduction campaigns will be taken as proof that their events promote substance abuse and unsafe sex.

³² Two events dedicate the entire proceeds to charity: Halloween New Orleans and Qualia in Columbus, Ohio.

CHAPTER 2

THOUSANDS OF DANCING GAY MEN

Like everyone else here, I dance much of the night like a madman. I take off my shirt and make some “friends,” those people with whom you convince yourself you have a profound connection—until you realize it was “just the drugs.”

Michelangelo Signorile, “The Evangelical Church of the Circuit” (110)

Dance is powerful. It is a source of profound sensual, emotional, and spiritual pleasures for people from cultures around the world. At a certain level, people who dances for pleasure understand each other, in much the same way that we all understand what it is like to breath.

I am a dancing fool. I dance around my house. I dance in the shower. I dance in my car when I drive. Sometimes I dance when I write. I would rather dance than eat, sleep, or have sex. And I never dance alone, even when I am by myself. But I do not dance professionally.

Popular dance is a means of nonverbal communication and sharing that has more to teach us about ourselves as social beings than professional dance could ever teach us. More of us dance recreationally than dance professionally, and we do it for free. For those of us who are profoundly sonically driven, we pay

good money for the chance to, as Signorile says, “dance much of the night like a madman.” The production of fun is serious business, and many of us who attend Circuit parties find that the benefits of having a good time on the dance floor go far beyond taking our shirts off and making “friends” on drugs.

Social forces that infuse the Circuit are also present in line dance, aerobics class, Hip-Hop, 2-step, square dance, Bon dance, bembra, samba, bhangra, military march, Spirit-filled church, Simcha Torah, t'ai ch'i, and Sufi sama. We experience these same forces in Raves, nightclubs of every kind, and most wedding receptions.

The Circuit is closely related to a larger scene of communal dance that is marked by a preference for underground dance music called *house music*. This scene has gone worldwide as *house culture*. It includes metrosexual (Straight men and women who are culturally Gay) club culture, Raves, and is highly visible in annual gatherings such as the Winter Music Conference in Miami and Burning Man in the Nevada desert. All of these communities and events promote ecstatic communal bonding through dance and altered states. House culture is now a worldwide phenomenon.

But understanding the social forces in house culture and the Circuit is not easy because dance itself has not been adequately investigated. In academia, popular dance (contemporary expressions of informal communal dance by

everyday folk³³) usually takes a back seat to formal dance, such as ballet, tap, and modern. College dance departments tend to be more concerned with the production of stage performance than the understanding of nonprofessional dance genres. These usually fall in the domain of anthropologists and folklorists, especially when they are deemed “traditional.” Neither anthropologists nor folklorists, however, have developed workable language to deal with how or why we move together to rhythm.

I suspect that there are moral reasons why formal dance is privileged by our educational system and popular dance is an academic stepchild. Since popular dance is often associated with intoxication and sexual irresponsibility, many societies consider it to be excessive, mindless, and bordering on the indecent.³⁴ Almost every form of popular communal dance I can think of has been condemned at some point in history as an immoral activity.

³³ Popular dance is a kind of folk communal dance in which people come together for the purpose of social expression and sharing. Neither profit nor professional training is an issue for them; it is done by themselves, for themselves.

³⁴ This is especially true in Christian societies with roots in Western European Protestantism. There is an old Catholic joke about Baptists that I learned as a teenager: “Why do Baptists not allow premarital sex? Because it might lead to dancing.”

Circuit stigma, Circuit outlaw

The history of the Circuit is that of an outlaw community (Gay men) that uses morally suspect activities (communal dance, sex, and intoxicants) to create new social norms based on tolerance, non-violence, altered states, and festival. These norms are emerging as important aspects informing the larger global movement of house culture. In fact, house culture and the Circuit both emerge from the Gay male dance scene of the 1970s and '80s.

The excessive dancing and revelry of the Circuit make it a common target for moral watchdogs within the Gay community. Critics such as Michelangelo Signorile blame Circuit parties for an assortment of social evils, including HIV transmission, drug addiction, and phony friendships. I wonder, however, if the real problem is how these critics trivialize dance in general—if the root of their criticism is simply disdain for those of us who would waste our money, time, and brain cells on something so *frivolous*.

In much of the literature on Gay culture, scholars emphasize either the process of normalizing (becoming mainstream) or queering (emphasizing our difference from the norm). I find that the Circuit community does both. The privileging of the muscular body and standard masculine mannerisms can be seen as a movement in the Circuit community to normalize its constituents into

adorable, beefy guys who just happen to have sex with each other. However, tolerance of illegal drugs, public sensuality, and rejection of violence undermine standard "Straight" values concerning health, sexual shame, and machismo.

The Circuit has been condemned by several notable "pro-normalist" Gay critics and AIDS activists such as Andrew Sullivan, Gabriel Rotello,³⁵ and, of course, Michelangelo Signorile, who all agree (at least on this one point) that the Circuit is oversexed, overdrugged, and undesirable. Some Gay spokespeople call for the end of the Circuit, which they see as nothing more than an excuse for taking illegal drugs and engaging in irresponsible sexual behavior.

I find it interesting, however, that some of the critics frame the Circuit in terms of spirituality, albeit phony spirituality. In *Life Outside*, Michelangelo Signorile calls the Circuit an "Evangelical Church," established upon the "sacraments" of steroids and club drugs, that preaches "the cult of masculinity" (Signorile 30-132). Signorile views the Circuit in much the same way that Joseph McCarthy viewed communism; it is an insidious evil that covertly undermines society:

The Evangelical Church of the Circuit is expanding and feeding the cult of masculinity, as its values and ideologies continue to filter down to all of the gay world... It will continue to beckon us to return to a lost adolescence, with all the fun and reckless disregard that goes with it. It

³⁵ In *Sexual Ecology*, Rotello speaks of "fund-raising circuit parties that implicitly foster, or wink at, drug use and unsafe sex," although he does add, "many party promoters have begun to express concerns and try to implement changes" (302).

will continue to promote its *virtual* friends and lovers, keeping many gay men from developing any real intimacy in their lives. It will continue to keep so many gay men awash in dangerous drugs... It will continue to compromise many gay men's abilities to have safer sex and tempt them with the exhilaration of going "bareback."

And it will continue to play upon all our anxieties over masculinity, forcing many gay men to do *whatever* it takes to achieve the demanded musculature. For a rapidly growing number of us, that means becoming immersed in the dangerous steroid craze now overtaking a segment of the gay male world, looking for happiness in a vial (Signorile 131-32).

Some "pro-queer" scholars such as Michael Warner are not so negative.

Warner sees the Circuit as one more target for condemnation by those who want to be Gay but are ashamed of those who are too queer:

On top of having ordinary sexual shame, and on top of having shame for being gay, the dignified homosexual also feels ashamed of every queer who flaunts his sex and his faggotry, making the dignified homosexual's stigma all the more justifiable in the eyes of straights. On top of that, he feels shame about his own shame, the fatedness of which he is powerless to redress. What's a poor homosexual to do?

Pin it on the fuckers who deserve it: sex addicts, bodybuilders in Chelsea or West Hollywood, circuit boys, flaming queens, dildo dykes, people with HIV, anyone who magnetizes the stigma you can't shake. The irony is that in this culture, such a response will always pass as sexual ethics. Larry Kramer and other gay moralists have made careers out of it... (*The Trouble with Normal* 32).

Circuit boys are a condemned community within a condemned community, a twofold example of what Erving Goffman calls a "spoiled" public identity (Goffman 1986, 107). Participants face the double stigma of being

labeled as homosexuals by the general public *and* “Circuit queens” (substance-abusive narcissistic sex fiends) by the Gay community in general.

But “stigma” implies that the reasons why the Circuit is condemned might be undeserved, that somehow, the Circuit community is unfairly singled out and victimized. Although true up to a point, framing the Circuit community as “stigmatized” may not be appropriate. I prefer the term “outlaw,” referring to the nonconformist, the rebel, one who rejects societal norms by taking unnecessary risks rather than one who is unfairly oppressed.

For many men, outlaw identity is an important marker for masculinity. The peculiar obsession that Straight men have with pirates, bank robbers, and rock stars is based on a romanticized image of outlaws as real men who do not kowtow to the whims of society. This same impulse can be found in Gay men as well, but usually not with the fondness for violent stereotypes that are so attractive to their Straight brothers. There is a love/hate relationship between the Gay male community and the Circuit, not unlike the attraction/repulsion Gay men feel towards strippers and porn stars, except that strippers and porn stars tend to carry more status than Circuit boys.³⁶

³⁶ Privileging of the stripper and porn star over the Circuit boy may be due to the vanity of non-Circuit Gay men; at least strippers and porn stars are nice to anyone who is willing to give them money. Most Circuit boys are not for sale.

Although most Gay men have heard of the Circuit and many have participated in it at some time or another, the majority of Gay men are either uneasy about it or condemn it outright, and their uneasiness is not without reason. The Circuit sits on the intersection of sexual desire, illegal drug use, the body beautiful, and public display—all areas of anxiety for the average Gay man. Because of the Circuit community's sensitivity to its own outlaw image, much of what I report can only be observed first-hand as a trusted insider.

The Gay bubble

There is another reason why we should refrain from seeing the Circuit as a stigmatized community. Homophobia, usually portrayed as the bane of Gay society, allows the Circuit a degree of privilege. Societal rules are not the same for Straight men and Gay men. The reason for the differences can be ascribed to the “Gay bubble,” a hegemonic barrier around the Gay community.

Gay men tend to be treated differently because they are perceived to be less violent. Take clothing, for example. Many Straight dance clubs have restrictive rules concerning dress for men. No clothes with sports team logos, no sneakers, no T-shirts, no tank tops, no ball caps. These items of clothing are

thought to incite violence.³⁷ The dress code for Gay male dance venues, however, is usually nonexistent. Circuit parties are even more open; shirts are optional. The Black Party in New York does not require any clothing at all.

This attitude towards Gay men may also transcend race. Columbus, Ohio has an event every spring called “Heritage Weekend” for the African American community. During this time, the area around the Ohio State campus is filled with revelers who come from all over the state and beyond for the festivities. As with OSU home football games, law enforcement is on the alert for bad behavior.

During Heritage Weekend 2001, Kevin and I went to Axis Nightclub (a Gay venue) on High Street, in the middle of a massive number of cars and people who came to the African American festival. Traffic was jammed for about a three-mile stretch, and there was barely any room on the sidewalks. But there was no crowd in the parking lot in front of Axis; most of the revelers walked by without hardly even a glance. It was as if the club had an invisible force field around it (the same thing happens, by the way, during a celebratory evening after an OSU football game).

When we left the club at 2:30 am, we were walking behind a couple of effeminate African American Gay men. The police (European American) were guiding festival attendees back to their hotels or out of the city. Totally ignoring

³⁷ This topic will be further explored in a later chapter.

Kevin and myself (both of us European American), they stared sharply at the men ahead of us for a minute and then ignored them as well. I am sure that, if the couple had been judged to be African American and Straight, the police would have stopped them to see if they were residents.

Ironically, homophobia may also strengthen the invisible force field. The dynamics were obvious to us when we attended the Miami Winter Party, an open-air, daytime Circuit party on the beach sand by the ocean in South Beach. The only thing separating the party from the rest of the beach is a thin plastic sheet about 4 ft. tall. I have seen people, especially men with their girlfriends, look in curiously, realize what is going on, and then abruptly snap their heads forward as if they were afraid that somebody might see them looking.

Even though I frame the circuit community as an outlaw community, it does not negate the fact that the circuit community is privileged as well. The higher income and education level of participants, the care of the self that leads to enhanced physical beauty and muscle, the poise that one gets when one learns to navigate such potentially devastating waters, all these markers of confidence worn by the average Circuiteer can no doubt reduce the public censure that other, less attractive, outlaws face. Add the lack of violence and the Gay bubble, and it is plain to see that the average circuit boy or girl has the potential to be a very happy person.

But that happiness can be dampened and even transformed to tremendous anxiety with drug addiction, sexual irresponsibility (and possible infection), and obsession with one's appearance. When allowed to proceed unchecked, transgression, excess, and unbridled vanity can undermine whatever magic there might be when one spends too much time with thousands of dancing Gay men.

PART II ROOTS

CHAPTER 3

A SHORT HISTORY OF HOMOSEXUALITY: 700 BCE-1969 CE

When all the world is a hopeless jumble
and the raindrops tumble all around
heaven opens a magic lane
When all the clouds darken up the skyway
there's a rainbow highway to be found
leading from your window pane
to a place behind the sun
just a step beyond the rain
Somewhere, over the rainbow, way up high
there's a land that I heard of once in a lullaby
Somewhere over the rainbow, skies are blue
and the dreams that you dare to dream
really do come true

“Somewhere Over the Rainbow”
E. Y. Harburg, music by Harold Arlen

History is an exercise in selection. Some scholars focus on catastrophic events, such as wars and natural disasters. Others look at social progress and technological advances over the ages. I find that Gay history is best measured by parties.

As a Gay festive movement that celebrates the forbidden, the Circuit has ancestors. The oldest Gay communities are remembered today because of parties, scandals, and executions that occurred 300 years ago. Modern GLBT history

revolves around the mythical Stonewall Awakening,³⁸ a pivotal event in 1969 that involved dancing, liquor, cross-dressing, and three days of civil unrest and street revelry.

The following chapter includes a brief sketch of different ways that same-sex love has been framed in Western civilization, followed by examples of Gay male festive culture and persecution by the authorities before the Gay liberation movement started.

There is much debate among Queer scholars as to exactly when we can say with certainty that Gay communities existed. Further debate revolves around when same-sex love became an identity and not an act. I hold to the following two points: 1) in societies where same-sex love was seen as humorous, there was less chance of it being brutally suppressed, and 2) those who condemned homosexuality would frame homosexuals as denizens of certain imagined places, thus describing them in terms of shared demonic identity that must be obliterated.

³⁸ Although many sources call the events at Stonewall in 1969 the “Stonewall Riots” or “Uprising,” I prefer the term “Awakening.” The biggest lesson that Stonewall teaches us is awareness of our rights, coupled with the awareness that we can demand our rights without the need to resort to bloodshed.

Evidence, language, and censorship

If we consider romance to be a pivotal issue in GLBT identity, then it may honestly be said that, *as a chronicle of same-sex love*, Gay history goes back thousands of years. But a history of same-sex communities can only go back to the early 18th century, when we find convincing evidence of distinctly homosexual festive culture. There is little evidence confirming the existence of groups whose members defined themselves by their same-sex orientation before that time.³⁹

We still have problems with describing same-sex love today. Terminology for same-sex attraction, communities, and identities is not yet standardized with any precision. Throughout most of history as we know it, language about these things has been severely imprecise for a couple of reasons. First, there has been a tradition of oppression in many countries that encouraged people not to express same-sex erotic feelings, or if they did, to keep them secret. The language that is used for these feelings is often cryptic, damning, and insulting. Records of people who are arrested for violating social norms concerning homosexuality speak of the crime as being so heinous that it should not be expressed in words.

³⁹ This does not, of course, prove that such groups did not exist. I believe that they did. But I put that conjecture on the same mental shelf as my belief that there is life on other planets: until I have proof, I will not consider it to be established fact.

Since it must be expressed so that it could be documented in the process of legal inquiry and sentencing, however, convoluted and obscure language was often used. Second, it is possible to engage in same-sex romance for a lifetime, yet never identify oneself with others in the same situation. To be intimately involved in same-sex romance is not synonymous with publicly supporting such romances.

Mangled language about homosexuality for the sake of moral propriety suggests fascinating dynamics of social anxiety, especially concerning manliness. As scholars, we can reduce this anxiety and the linguistic confusion it generates by defining our own terms with more precision. For clarity's sake, I will use "homosexual"⁴⁰ to refer to women and men in every age and society who feel same-sex romantic attraction. "Gay" will refer to those homosexuals who form their own communities and cultures based on acceptance and celebration of same-sex love.

⁴⁰ Originally, "homosexual" was a term coined in the mid-19th century to describe same-sex sexual orientation in medical-psychological-biological language. Today, it is slightly pejorative. Nevertheless, I find the word useful in describing those with same-sex orientation but not necessarily the awareness or acceptance of the Gay community or culture. For my purposes, "homosexual love" and "same-sex romance" are synonymous.

Pre-1700

In Western civilization, same-sex love can be found in every age. Widespread criminalization of homosexuality, however, did not begin in earnest until around the last centuries of the Roman Empire when the writings of Christian theologians incorporated portions of Hebrew law into Roman law. Since that time (and up to the 1970s), most historical references to same-sex love in Western countries are in religious treatises condemning it as a sin, medical reports describing it as a defect, and legal records treating it as a crime.

There are signs that humor played a significant role in preventing criminalization of people with same-sex romantic orientation in most pre-Christian Western discourse.⁴¹ Homosexuality was commonly seen as an amusing aberration, sometimes praised, often seen as degrading, but usually tolerated.

Sex between men was problematic because of the way sex in general was understood. The act of sex always involved a masculine (penetrator) and a feminine (penetrated) partner. When sex involved two full-grown men, one of them became a woman, which for many cultures was absurd. Sex could also mean a serious reduction in status for the penetrated man because he undermined men's

⁴¹ I refer to the traditional way in which Western history is understood, that Mediterranean cultures before the rise of Christianity also fall into the category of "Western," particularly those associated with Classical Greece and Rome.

inherent superiority to women. Any man who allowed his passions to overcome his self-respect was the proper target of ridicule. In other words, if a man allowed himself to be sexually penetrated, he risked being labeled an effeminate clown who behaved without proper restraint.⁴²

Overall, it appears that discourse on homosexuality in classical Greece and Rome was usually negative, but benignly so. Same-sex love was closely associated with effeminacy in men, which was both shameful and funny. Male effeminate behavior was often a trait associated with foreigners or an insult applied to other cultures. There are few traces of anything resembling Gay communities in Greece and Rome, perhaps because ridicule as a means of social censure discouraged them from coming out.

Hebrew discourse was much less tolerant. It was framed with the same understanding of penetrator=masculine and penetrated=feminine but with a different religious ethic. The insistence that things not be mixed or confused (such as milk with meat, Hebrew with Gentile, G-d with human, etc.) applied to the sexes. Men were to behave as men, and women were to behave as women. For one to take on the role of another in dress, behavior, or the sexual act was not

⁴² In Athens, if the passive partner were an adolescent, then it was not considered as clownish. In the sexual play between adult men and boys, boys were expected to be passive, and their role was understood to be more like women (Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure* 193-195, 220-225).

funny at all in the eyes of the Hebrew religious authorities. It was condemned as a legal, ethical, and spiritual abomination and consequently criminalized. Hebrew understanding of homosexuality was incorporated into Christian and Muslim law.

We will see this same dynamic in many instances in world history⁴³: when authorities no longer find homosexuality humorous, it becomes dangerous and treated as if it were a contagious disease. Language about same-sex love is then quarantined to prevent infection. It is spoken only when one hurls insults, confesses sins of the flesh, is intoxicated, or makes court cases against sex offenders.

Active criminalization of homosexuality began in the Roman Empire in 342 CE, only thirty years after the Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity. Offenders were to be burned alive (Spencer 75). This led to 1600 years of persecution against sodomy (and Sodomites), Lesbian relationships, and cross-dressing. Homophobia was expressed in demonological terms that condemned it in language far more extreme than that used by the Hebrews.

Homophobia also served a political purpose: it was expedient to portray foreign enemies as Sodomites. Christian nations encountering the occupants of

⁴³ Oppression of homosexuality does not come exclusively from religious authorities. When nonreligious communist regimes in the 20th century and fascist countries like Nazi Germany quit laughing, Gay communities were brutally suppressed without the need for recourse to Jewish, Christian, or Muslim theology.

the New World would often report the presence of Sodomites in their midst as a means for proof of moral degradation and justification for their conquest (Trexler 1). As late as 17th century England, homophobic discourse was used to justify holy war against Muslims. According to Nabil Matar, “The sodomite was the Muslim writ large...Sodomy served to legitimate Christian/European moral superiority and to prepare for holy war” (Matar 127).

Christian discourse helped shape Gay communities, most notably by the silence that the discourse imposed on same-sex love, which was not to be named.⁴⁴ Persecution gave homosexuals good reason to band together so that they could protect themselves from public scrutiny, create safe places for romantic encounters, form lasting relationships of their own choosing, and bend the rules of gendered behavior. These laws also gave them incentive to stay invisible.

As mentioned earlier, same-sex love was described in terms of place as well as sexual behavior. Many Queer scholars claim that homosexuality was seen as an act before modern times, not as an identity. This, however, is only partially true. Homosexuality was also described in terms of geographical identity.

“Lesbian” means somebody from the isle of Lesbos, “Sodomite” means a person from Sodom. Since geographic identity is often associated with ethnicity, I submit

⁴⁴ The unspeakable nature of same-sex love led to it being called “sodomy” after the biblical city of Sodom. But sodomy could also refer to bestiality and other forbidden sex acts. It is nevertheless clear from many records that sodomy was often used explicitly in reference to same-sex romance between men.

that “Sodomite” and “Lesbian” do not simply describe what people do. They name *who they are* in terms of community identity framed as a fictitious form of citizenship. Even if we cannot prove that Gay communities existed before 300 years ago, we have plenty of evidence that people who hated homosexuals had demonized them in terms of a shared outlaw identity that approximated ethnicity. Homosexual acts are not simply criminal; they are transformative.⁴⁵

Early 1700s: molly houses

The earliest evidence of Gay communities goes back to 18th century “molly houses” in England where Gay men (called “mollies,” Spencer 188⁴⁶) developed their own festive culture in private clubs. Members could drink alcoholic beverages, sing, dance, dress up and behave like women, adopt “girl” names, and perform mock births. They would engage in marriages, which included serious ones based on lifetime commitment, and frivolous ones, temporary one-night stands called “wedding nights.” Sexual encounters with each other were conducted in back rooms called “chapels.”

⁴⁵ Homophobia in America today continues the tradition of demonization and the transformational power of homosexual acts. As a teenager growing up in Alabama. I remember one popular saying: “If you steal once, you’re not a thief. Suck a dick once, and you’re a faggot forever.”

⁴⁶ “Molly” is a nickname for “Mary,” and “moll” was a slang term for a prostitute.

Once inside the molly house, Gay men would be free to cut loose with behavior that was unorthodox, scandalous, and hilarious. From accounts given by Samuel Stevens, an agent for the Societies for the Reformation of Manners who raided Margaret (Mother) Clap's Molly house in 1726, same-sex lovemaking between men went hand-in-hand with effeminate performance:

I found between 40 and 50 men making love to one another, as they called it. Sometimes they would sit in one another's laps, kissing in a lewd manner and using their hands indecently. Then they would get up, dance and make curtsies, and mimic the voices of women...Then they would hug, and play and toy, and go out by couples into another room on the same floor to be married, as they called it (Norton 55).

Stevens' description of male same-sex love as synonymous with effeminate behavior may have been an attempt to portray mollies as more gender-perverse than they really were. Mollies did not always dress up as women.⁴⁷ In fact, feminine clothing was mostly reserved for special events such as a masquerade and a "lying-in" (mock birth). When feminine dress and/or mannerisms were adopted, it appeared to have no bearing on sexual roles of "top" (penetrator) or "bottom" (penetrated). It would also be a mistake to assume that

⁴⁷ Molly houses would eventually lose their reputations as havens for male-to-female cross-dressing in the 19th century (Spencer 193), perhaps as a security measure to keep away the authorities that might view the presence of cross-dressing as a sign of depravity.

all Mollies were helpless weaklings, as police discovered on December of 1725 when the men they arrested in a molly house decided to resist (Norton 96-101).

There were signs that mollies had developed their own festive culture. They had their own slang, which included “battersea’d” (a term for sexually transmitted infection),⁴⁸ “back room” (a more private place for sex, Norton 62),⁴⁹ and “maiden names” that they gave each other. Nicknames for participants were common; many of them were humorous. “Margaret Clap” appears to have been the legal name of the proprietress of Mother Clap’s molly house. I question, however, if that was her original name from birth. “Clap” also referred to a venereal disease in the early 18th century, just as it does today. Since mollies had a fondness for hilarious speech, I am sure Mother Clap’s name was appreciated for its sexual innuendo.

Maiden names for mollies were often preceded with “Madam,” “Miss,” “Mrs.” or “Aunt.” Sometimes the names would indicate the real-life job of the molly, such as Orange Deb (Martin Macintosh, an orange seller), Dip-Candle Mary (candle maker), and Nurse Mitchell (barber; in those days, barbers also did

⁴⁸ “Battersea’d” is a word used by mollies that probably means to have a penis infected with venereal disease and required treatment with special medicinal herbs grown in Battersea Park.

⁴⁹ “Back room” is still used today. The more raunchy Gay bars have specially-designated back rooms for sex.

minor surgery). Sometimes not: Kitty Cambric (coal merchant), Black-Eyed Lenora (drummer of the Guards), and Miss Sweet Lips (grocer). Maiden names were given to men who were well-built, such as Fanny Murray (a beefy bargeman) and Lucy Cooper (a muscular coal-heaver). Others preferred names that were simply grand, especially considering the occupation of the men holding the title: Aunt England (soap-boiler), Lady Godiva (waiter), the Duchess of Gloucester (butcher), Queen Irons (probably a blacksmith), and the fabulous Princess Seraphina (butcher). “Molly,” “Margaret,” and “Mary” were favorite first names (Norton 92-93).⁵⁰

Once again, the name given to engagers in same-sex love were not names descriptive of acts, but rather gender identity markers. Such names were part of the hilarious performance of molly identity. The importance of these names in marking mollies as feminine (the names were, after all, preserved in the legal proceedings) was arguably given much more importance by the outside world than by the mollies themselves.

Molly houses disappeared from history in the nineteenth century, and probably for good reason. Men accused of being mollies were arrested, fined,

⁵⁰ These maiden names were taken from court records of men who were brought up on charges of sodomy. “Miss,” “Mary,” “princess,” and “queen” are still popular in the Gay male community.

beaten, pilloried, imprisoned, and executed.⁵¹ The Gay community was forced to go deeper underground to the point where it could no longer be so easily seen by the public eye (Norton 191-93).

Although hard evidence in the historical record for Gay communities would diminish with the successful persecution of molly house culture, Gay society appears to have survived under different maiden names. At the beginning of the 1800s, the molly community became the Margery community. By the end of the century, “Margery” turned into “Mary-Ann” (Norton 105). The change in names was probably inspired by the need for in-house secrecy as much as a shift in verbal fashions—once a name gained currency in the outside world, a new one would no doubt take its place.

18th century raids on homosexual activity also give us what may be the first public statement of Gay pride. When apprehended in 1726 by plainclothes police for putting an undercover agent’s hand on his penis in a public park, William Brown was reported to have said, “I think there is no Crime in making what use I please of my own body” (Norton 58).

⁵¹ Women could be arrested as well. Mother Clap was brought to court, fined, pilloried, and sent to prison for running a molly house. It is not known if she survived the ordeal.

1890s-1969: “Gay” adoption

The history of Gay communities in the US can be traced back to the 19th century.⁵² It was not until the 1930s, however, that these communities were called “gay.”

At the end of the 1800s, New York City became a hotspot for homosexual socializing, including communal dance. According to George Chauncey,

In the half-century between 1890 and the beginning of the Second World War, a highly visible, remarkably complex, and continually changing Gay male world took shape in New York City. That world included several gay neighborhood enclaves, widely publicized dances and other social events, and a host of commercial establishments where gay men gathered, ranging from saloons, speakeasies, and bars to cheap cafeterias and elegant restaurants (Chauncey 1).

But it was still necessary for homosexuals to be discreet about who they were, so the innocent word “gay” was used as a code to inform others about one’s sexual orientation.

Actually, “gay” was not that innocent of a word. Like “molly,” “gay” was initially associated with prostitution. It was during that half-century that the term “gay” became a code word for men and women who were homosexual (Hogan

⁵² There are enticing clues that point to Gay communities among Native Americans. Unfortunately, the record is sparse. But I can state with reasonable certainty that there is ample evidence of homosexuality, and that homosexuals were tolerated, even revered, by certain Native peoples.

and Hudson 229). During that time, it was not well known to the outside world. Common terms for a person with same-sex desires were “invert,” “degenerate,” “pervert,” “queer,” “homo,” and “deviant.” Homosexual men were regularly called “pansy,” “faggot,” and “fairy.” Lesbians were called “dykes,” while the term “bull dagger” was used in the African American community.⁵³ “Gay” is a term that came from the homosexual community to describe itself, although initially it was used primarily to describe bars rather than people. When one was a stranger in town, it was a subtle way to discover where the right bars were without necessarily giving away one’s own queer sexual orientation (Chauncey 14-20).

Perhaps the first public use of “gay” to hit the media was in the 1938 film, *Bringing Up Baby*. There is a scene where famous actor and sex symbol Cary Grant is wearing a woman’s fur-trimmed nightgown. “I just went gay all of a sudden!” he gushes when asked why he dressed that way. The line was ad-libbed, an illustration that the term was current in actors’ circles (Chauncey 18, Hofan and Hudson 229). This is not surprising when we consider that close connection that the Gay community, closeted and otherwise, had with the entertainment world. Not only were Gay folks participating in large numbers behind the scenes, they were also represented in some of the productions. Cabarets and burlesque shows in Times Square regularly featured routines peppered with humorous

⁵³ Most of these terms are still current.

homosexual innuendos. Drag (cross-dressing) performances called “pansy shows” were the rage in the early 1930s.

Theater was the first public institution in America to present GLBT people with sympathy. Two major theatrical productions with homosexual content came out in the 1920s; both were censored by the media and the police when they aimed for Broadway. The first was *The Captive*, which dealt with the “problem” of Lesbianism. The second was *The Drag*, written by Mae West (with the help of some Gay friends), which defended Gay male culture and was performed by Gay men. *The Captive* raised eyebrows and threats of censorship but succeeded to run for about a year before it was shut down. *The Drag*, however, never made it to Broadway. West and members of her cast were arrested for attempting to perform the play in public before it had the chance to reach the Great White Way (Chauncey 311-14).

Drag balls

The growing visibility of Gays on stage was complemented by the public glamour of drag balls, extravagant productions where men, mostly men of color, dressed and carrying themselves as women. In New York and other cities such as New Orleans, Chicago, and Baltimore, drag balls were popular in the 1910s, ‘20s

and '30s.⁵⁴ They were magnificent playgrounds for taboo-breaking: dazzling, cosmopolitan, witty, hilarious, and spectacular. Most prominent among them were the Harlem drag balls of New York City.

As with the molly houses, homosexuality in men was still equated with effeminate behavior, and many Gay men continued the tradition of giving each other “girl” names. What was different was the public visibility of cross-dressing as glamorous functions of high society rather than secret criminal gatherings of butchers, blacksmiths, and candlestick makers.⁵⁵

During the late 1920s and early 1930s, drag balls were regularly reported in newspapers as part of the social calendar for the elite. The socialite magazine *Broadway Brevities* had various witty articles written about Gay society by authors⁵⁶ with names steeped in sexual innuendo, such as “Stephen O’Toole,” “John Swallow Martin,” and “Connie Lingue” between 1931 and 1932. On March 14, 1932, *Broadway Brevities* had an article entitled “FAG BALLS EXPOSED: 6000 Crowd Huge Hall as Queer Men and Women Dance at 64th Annual

⁵⁴ Chauncey 1-7

⁵⁵ The glamour of the drag balls did not prevent men with low economic and social status from grabbing the limelight. We do well to remember that the most popular balls featured African American queens whose fame depended on their beauty, outfits, and drag personas, not their identities outside the magical world of the drag balls.

⁵⁶ Chauncey suspects that these provocative names were pseudonyms for one unknown Gay author.

Masquerade,” which claimed that “Merrymakers from 25 States” joined in the revelries (Chauncey 300). In addition to the outrageous double-entendre of the article’s name, it confirms that drag balls were more than simply pageants; they were also festivals with communal dancing for both Gay men and Lesbians. The geographical diversity of attendees also suggests a regular circuit of drag balls from city to city for *aficionados*, performers, and party people.

Drag balls were partially modeled after debutante balls that officially presented young women to society. As such, they were celebrations of public identity. When a Gay man made his debut at a ball, he was not simply coming out in front of other Gay men. He (or in this case, *she*) came out in front of *everybody*. Chauncey tells us,

The Baltimore debutantes, after all, came out in the presence of hundreds of straight as well as gay and lesbian spectators at the public hall of the fraternal order of Elks. Their sisters in New York were likely to be presented to thousands of spectators, many of whom had traveled from other cities, in some of the best-known ballrooms of the city, including the Savoy and Rockland Palace in Harlem and the Astor Hotel and Madison Square Garden in midtown (Chauncey 7).

Eventually, drag balls were banned for being subversive. Much of the crackdown was the work of the Society for the Suppression of Vice, founded in 1872 under the New York YMCA. This anti-vice organization was dedicated to eliminating birth control, obscenity in the arts, prostitution, and race-mixing (Chauncey 138-9). Spencer theorizes that the tolerance of the Gay community

toward women and Blacks was as great a threat to the establishment as the evils of sodomy:

What is significant is that equality between black and white, and male and female, appears to have been generated by homosexuality itself...It is one aspect of homosexuality that the rest of society unconsciously fears, that if it had the power it would enact legislation, not just to remove all stigma and injustice from itself, but from all other oppressed minorities as well (Spencer 345).⁵⁷

After WWI, social-purity groups became more and more preoccupied with homosexuality. This was due in part to a feeling of guilt its members had resulting from their perceived success in eliminating much of female prostitution, which then drove men (especially servicemen) into the arms of pannies. As with ancient societies before them, homosexuality was associated with foreigners. The French were blamed for contaminating the minds of American soldiers with homosexual lust during the First World War (Chauncey 146-8).

The growing visibility of Gays in theater during the 1920s and '30s led to a crackdown on more explicit portrayals of homosexuality on stage. It was inevitable that the theatrical drag balls, with their race-mixing as well as their homosexual content, would have to go underground. But the balls would not truly die. The social forces, erotic desires, and aesthetic impulses that dated back to the

⁵⁷ It is not always the case, however, that Gay organizations are racially tolerant. Mardi Gras krewes (festival clubs) made up of White Gay men have been legally chartered in New Orleans since 1961. They were not renowned for racial tolerance any more than Straight krewes (Laughery 276).

days of molly houses would be resurrected again and again as drag balls transformed and diversified.

Away from the public eye, drag shows and contests continued and became the drag queen performances and pageants that permeate Gay culture today, including Gay men's dance culture. Two new drag traditions would appear many years later. The first is the African American "ballroom scene" of the 1970s, '80s and '90s. These contests of "realness" (the ability to "pass" in society with whatever gendered outfit one chooses to wear, be it rich, poor, masculine, or feminine) and competitive dance/posing that characterizes "voguing" are direct descendants of drag ball culture. From vogue culture and drag queen pageantry came the second new tradition: the fierce semi-drag lip-sync "hot spots" that originated in the Circuit during the late '90s. Hot spots are short, one-song performances of 5-7 minutes by the aforementioned performance artists (many who are African-American) with shaved heads, striking femme make-up, costumes made as much for dance as for show, and back-up dancers. The performance is done to a current dance song, which is mixed into the set being played by the DJ without interfering with the flow of the music, changing the tempo, or talking to the audience. Most major Circuit parties have hot spots.

When the police started closing down legitimate venues for drag balls and other Gay functions, formal ballroom dances for Gay folk were downsized and

went underground in the form of house parties and illegal dance clubs until Stonewall. The Depression hit just about everyone, so rich and poor alike were throwing rent parties, private fundraisers where charity truly began at home. Many were small affairs, but some were large events thrown by formerly rich Gay folk who wanted to keep their fine houses. Circuit parties can be seen as a continuation of those clandestine dances. At their height in early 1940s New York, extravagant house parties formed a regular Saturday night circuit of their own (Chauncey 279). A feature of Gay African American house parties in Harlem was the presence of both men and women, in part as a strategy to avoid police raids. Couples composed of a man and a woman would arrive and leave the parties to preserve the appearance of being heterosexual. Once inside, women would dance with women, and men with men (Chauncey 279-80).

It is not unreasonable to assume that Prohibition allowed a brief space for Gay culture to flourish in the huge underground bar scene (Chauncey 148). Once liquor got legalized, that space disappeared. At the same time, it became more difficult for the increasingly public drag ball scene to avoid scrutiny by the authorities, including the military. Public censure of the Gay community gained momentum just before the US entered World War II. The inevitable backlash was intensified when the ominous threat of war sobered the nation. Being Gay was no longer considered a laughing matter because homosexuality was understood to be

a threat to national security (Chauncey 331-54). The promotion of martial masculinity of America fostered intolerance for pansies as the country prepared for war against Nazi Germany and imperial Japan. This manly intolerance contributed to the general backlash that came with greater visibility of drag balls, just as the rise of militant and hyper-masculine National Socialism in Germany snuffed out the thriving and increasingly visible Gay community in Berlin during the 1930s.

World War II and Gay awareness

On the other hand, World War II was also quite significant in the formation of Gay communal awareness. Large numbers of men were segregated from normal society and forced to live together. The mobilization of men from across the country, separated from the usual constraints of family and friends and exposed to the intimate day-to-day contact that brothers-in-arms had with each other, led thousands of homosexual servicemen to in furlough cities such as San Francisco and New York where they encountered discrete Gay communities (Chauncey 11-12).

Nevertheless, the military was committed, especially in the latter part of the war, to keeping these men from sleeping with each other. City ordinances

against serving openly Gay men led to a proliferation of exclusively Gay bars in major urban centers. Many Gay bar owners bribed police on a regular basis so that their establishments would remain open.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, there was always the threat of having Gay bars closed by vice squads and military police in the 1940s, '50s, and well into the '60s (Boyd 108-47, Atkins 91).

In spite of oppression from both civil and military authorities, I believe that homosexual soldiers returning from WW II came home with a stronger sense of their own masculinity. The validation of masculinity and citizenship by means of military service during WWII was an important factor in the equal rights movement for Native, Asian, Hispanic, and African Americans. I submit that it also helped the emerging Gay community define itself, not as deviance from masculinity, but as potentially masculine for “butch” Gay men and even hypermasculine forms, as in the Leather scene with its paramilitary attire.

The military was instrumental in giving both Gay women and men a positive sense of identity. The first was the validation of women as protectors of the nation rather than simply those who needed protection from the nation. “Rosie the Riveter” is still very much a Lesbian icon as well as a symbol for women’s

⁵⁸ Nan Boyd’s book on San Francisco (*Wide-Open Town*) and Gary Atkin’s book on Seattle (*Gay Seattle*) go into detail about the importance of police bribery and consequential cooperation from law officers in the formation of Gay urban communities.

liberation;⁵⁹ many Gay men identify with her as well. The second was the assurance, at least in the minds of masculine homosexual male soldiers, that they were “real men” regardless of their desires. Many Gay men in the post-war era were recognized as soldiers, certified by the battlefield as legitimate men. No longer was male sexual identity restricted to either being a “real” Straight man or a pansy.

The challenge for so-called “masculine” Gay men was to remain anonymous as homosexuals, and large urban centers allowed them to fade into the masses. Even though big cities had a more obvious Gay presence in certain parts of town, the development and expression of a public Gay male masculinity was severely limited by socially imposed pressures on these men to remain invisible. For many more years to come, notions of being a "real man" would be mostly projected onto the Straight male as the only manly, and thus desirable, man (Bronski 103).

1930s-1960s: Fire Island

The geography of Gay America includes safe havens at beach resorts, such as Provincetown (MA), Key West, Saugatuck (MI), Rehoboth (DE), 12th Avenue

⁵⁹ T-shirts of “Rosie the Riveter” are still popular with Lesbians today.

access in South Beach (FL), West Street access in Laguna Beach (CA), 82nd Avenue access in Myrtle Beach (SC), and Queen's Beach in Honolulu.⁶⁰ But none of these resorts and beaches has the notoriety of Fire Island.

Fire Island is a barrier island just off the coast from Long Island, New York with approximately 30 small communities. Cherry Grove is one such community. According to anthropologist Esther Newton, author of *Cherry Grove, Fire Island*, "the Grove" is also one of the first communities to identify itself as a retreat for Gays as early as the 1930s. This was due primarily to its reputation as a resort for Manhattan theater people (Newton 13, 21-35). There were no standing police force and no churches, and it is still this way today. "Grovers" (residents of Cherry Grove) conduct town business and religious services in their community theater.

There are good historical reasons why Cherry Grove, which Newton calls "America's First Gay and Lesbian Town," did not have a church but did invest in a theater. Newton points out the importance of theater for the Gay community:

For centuries, homosexuals and theater have been silent partners in their conflict with churches. By saying that theater is Gay anti-church, I point to its social functions of affiliation and solidarity, and to the way theater has provided an iconography and sensibility for homoeroticism, in opposition to the way churches have worked for reproductively oriented society. And I also mean this: because of the biblically justified enmity toward sodomy, Gays have been alienated from Christianity and persecuted by it; they

⁶⁰ Provincetown, Saugatuck, South Beach, and Laguna Beach have their own Circuit events.

have sought both alternatives and resistance in theatricality as an ethos, and theaters as institutions, which is why I call theater a Gay “anti-church”—a queer Noah’s Ark against the flood of domination...Life was experienced theatrically by Grovers because underground Gay culture had descended from the theater world and continued to find a haven from its enemies there in both the power of dramatic representation and in everyday theatrical life (*Margaret Meade Made Me Gay* 35-6).

Another Gay community, the Fire Island Pines, would develop just northeast of Cherry Grove. The Pines would also use its theater for town business and religious services. Neither community has a police station *per sé*, but they do have police booths. Between the two communities is the Meat Rack, a wooded area that is popular as a place for men to have sex with men. Rumor has it that the Meat Rack once had a section in it called the Donut Rack where women would have sex with women (Newton, *Cherry Grove* 231-2).

Fire Island was renowned decades before Gay liberation for its house parties and drag shows of both sexes. The custom of “tea dances” (social gatherings held in early afternoon) began there. Even more so than the growing Gay enclaves in Manhattan and other large cities, Cherry Grove and the Pines were idyllic models of what life could be like for GLBT folk without police and religious persecution.

This did not mean, however, that Fire Island was completely immune from homophobic violence. Gay-bashers came over from Long Island in search of

victims.⁶¹ So did the police, who would conduct the occasional raid in the clubs, on the beach, and in the Meat Rack.

But in 1968, a year before the Stonewall Awakening, police vice raids on the Meat Rack from adjacent Long Island were stopped. Lawyers from the Gay activist Mattachine Society successfully ended the practice by 1) tying up the courts by insisting upon jury trials for every defendant caught in a raid, 2) accusing officials of attempting to buy cheap Fire Island property by harassing its Gay residents and forcing them to sell at a loss, and 3) arguing that public sex in the Meat Rack was not a criminal offense because, in a predominantly Gay community, such acts were morally permissible (Newton, *Cherry Grove* 197-201).⁶²

Because of the its fabulous parties, large Gay population, and reputation as a safe refuge, Fire Island became known across the nation as a Gay Mecca in both Straight and Gay communities, right up there with San Francisco. Its notoriety was so widespread that I had heard of queer Fire Island in Jacksonville, Alabama during the 1970s when I was in high school, even though I had never met an “out” Gay person.

⁶¹ Both Lesbians and Gay men have been victimized (Cherry Grove 204).

⁶² In addition to the efforts of the Mattachine Society, Newton also reports that fewer Fire Island residents were secretly calling the police to report public sex and instigating raids. As the Gay population grew and the Straight population got used to the antics of Gay men, amused tolerance rather than disgust became the prevailing reaction to the goings-on in the Meat Rack.

1950s and 1960s: Pre-Stonewall resistance across America

Although vitally important in GLBT history, Manhattan was not the only place that saw resistance to oppression against Gays.

The first group to successfully bring homosexuals out of the shadows was the Mattachine Society (initially called the Society of Fools), formed in 1950 in Los Angeles.⁶³ It took its name from a secret fraternity of bachelors in Renaissance France that would conduct dances during the Feast of Fools held on the spring equinox. Always masked when they danced, the fraternity would sometimes protest the oppression of the peasants. The founder of Mattachine, Harry Hay, saw the homosexual community in the same way: a masked people who were capable of bringing justice to the oppressed (Katz 412).

The Mattachine Society was harassed by the government during the McCarthy purges of the 1950s and officially disbanded in 1961. But homophile organizations in large cities continued to call themselves Mattachine societies

⁶³ The Mattachine Society was not the first organization in the US to advocate for Gays. In Chicago in 1924, the Society for Human Rights was formed to protect the rights of homosexuals. Although it was granted a charter by the state of Illinois, its members were arrested in 1925. The Society was swiftly shut down for being a “sex cult” (Katz 385-393).

(Hogan and Hudson 384). These groups help set the stage for the Gay liberation movement.

It should be noted that the Mattachine Society and its spin-offs had a reputation for propriety despite the origin of the name as a carnival troupe. They did not appear to use the term “Gay” when referring to themselves, perhaps because of its association with the bar scene. In order to win acceptance from the public, Mattachine members were expected to follow standard conventions concerning dress and behavior appropriate for men and women. Since their proposal of equality for homosexuals was already radical in the eyes of most Americans, they did not want to aggravate the situation by looking too queer, especially when the government began to persecute its members. Women could not wear pants, and men had to wear conservative shirts and ties. The Society considered itself to be a respectable homophile (same-sex loving) organization, not a radical Gay activist group.

In reaction to what they saw as the over-conservative stance and an accommodating attitude of the Mattachine Society toward those who saw homosexuality as a defect, some of its members began publishing a magazine called *ONE* in 1953. *ONE* was no longer concerned with reconciliation. After being charged by the FBI and the postal service with obscenity, *ONE's* case went

all the way to the Supreme Court of the United States, which ruled that the magazine was not obscene in 1958 (Laughery 235).

Unaware of the Mattachine Society, the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) were founded in San Francisco in 1955 by a group of women, including the longtime activist-couple Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, who wanted something other than the bar scene for Lesbians to meet each other and form a community. In 1956, the DOB began publishing *The Ladder*, a magazine dedicated to Lesbian issues (Hogan and Hudson 172-3).

Also in San Francisco, the Society for Individual Rights (SIR) was founded in 1964. Not comfortable with the Straight-laced attitude and image requirements of the Mattachine Society, SIR was more inclusive and community-oriented (Hogan and Hudson 512). SIR worked with city health officials and began a VD awareness campaign. The organization opened the first Gay community center in 1966 in an old union building on Sixth Street between Mission and Market. Dances were held there as well, perhaps the first venue to publicly allow Gay people to dance together. More than likely, it would also be the first time that Gay activists would become disillusioned when the folks they were trying to convert into a politically-conscious community were more concerned with having a good time (Loughery 280-282). This complaint would later be aimed at Circuit parties.

Perhaps only in 1964 San Francisco could dancing, revelry, religion, and Gays come together in harmony. DOB and SIR teamed up with Christian ministers in San Francisco to address problems faced by the Gay community. Cecil Williams, the African American pastor of the Glide Memorial Church in the Tenderloin, and European American minister/social worker Ted McIlvenna helped set up the Counsel on Religion and the Homosexual (CRH) in 1964. A new year's costume ball fundraiser sponsored by the CRH was organized and scheduled to take place on the very last evening of that year. Shocked by the idea of ministers working together with homosexuals, law enforcement officials met with the ministers and told them that they had better not go through with the party. When the fundraiser proceeded anyway, paddy wagons were lined up at the venue, photographers were there to shame the attendees by taking their pictures, and four people were arrested when they protested (Laughery 286). The public outcry against the police (from Protestant ministers, no less) dramatically improved GLBT civil rights and galvanized the Bay Area Gay community.

Police oppression did not stop—the spring of 1965 saw more arrests, more beatings, and a raid of a SIR fundraiser. The CRH published “A Brief on Injustices,” which stated, “there is very little justice for the homosexual.” The CRH also supported Citizens Alert, a telephone hotline for victims of Gay-bashing and police brutality (Laughery 287).

The 1960s saw Gay activists, such as the Reverend Troy Perry of Los Angeles and Clark Polak of Philadelphia, become progressively more confrontational. Perry was a Pentecostal minister who founded the Metropolitan Community Church in 1968 (Hogan and Hudson 387). Perry was defrocked in the early 1960s for being homosexual. After years of soul searching, he decided to form a Gay-affirming Christian congregation.⁶⁴ The first venue for worship outside of his home was the Encore Theater in Hollywood, and the first service held outside of LA was in the back room of a Gay bar in Orange County (Clendinen and Nagourney 57). Like Martin Luther King, Perry became the voice of conscience and a champion for his people, protesting discrimination and violence against Gays in LA and across the US (Laughery 287-290).

If Perry was pre-Stonewall's premier religious figure, Clark Polak was one of its most devilish radicals. Laughery gives a brief description of Polak:

Clark Polak was an irritant to most of his fellow members of the homophile movement and he could be fiercely undiplomatic, but he raised a key issue at an early date. Behind all of his efforts, the question is asked, To what extent will Gay men go to achieve their place at the table, while avoiding an indelicate focus on what they do in private when they are not at the table? As Polak knew, it wasn't only men turning from marriage and living with other men that stirred opposition. The thought of men kissing, touching, masturbating, sucking, fucking each other, and (worse) proudly admitting it, was what drove people crazy...The Clark Polak stance

⁶⁴ Although nominally Christian, MCC congregations tend to accept people of all faiths. The GLBT Jewish movement had some of its first meetings in MCC church facilities. The MCC church in Toronto is especially multi-faith in its congregation and its approach to religion.

suggested that the world might as well know what it was being asked, even (or especially) in its grubbiest form, to rethink and accept. Discretion, for Polak, was a trap in and of itself (Laughery 283-284).

In 1964, Polak and the Janus Society of America (a homophile group he founded) published a monthly magazine called *Drum*, which raised more than just political awareness. *Drum* included pictures of scantily clothed men (or men with no clothes at all) and articles like “The Beginner’s Guide to Cruising.” Besides displaying a positive attitude toward sex, *Drum* marched into the forbidden territory of illegal drugs, discussing what kind of fun could be had by smoking marijuana or ingesting hallucinogens. It also had Gay trivia questions and the first Gay comic strip.⁶⁵ Polak was forced to discontinue *Drum* by the authorities in 1969 (Laughery 283).

The issues that Polak addressed in terms of visibility and outlaw behavior related to sex and drugs would be hotly debated 30 years later as Circuit parties grew progressively more visible to the public eye.

Not to be left out, the South was bringing together a brotherhood of Gay men through the Emma Jones social network. It started in 1965 in the beach resort town of Pensacola on the Florida panhandle. A group of White Gay male friends wanted to avoid harassment from postal services when they ordered sexually-

⁶⁵ *Drum* was the less-sanitized forerunner of popular mainstream Gay magazines such as *Instinct*, *Genre*, and *Circuit Noize*.

explicit Gay movies, books, and magazines. They devised a fictitious identity, “Emma Jones,” who had “her” own post office box, and recruited a female friend to pick up the mail from that address (Laughery 273-4).

There is room to believe that people at the post office knew what was going on. Southern culture tends to put a high premium on public discretion when normally upstanding citizens are doing something that may be considered wrong. This may be seen as an extension of the Born-Again sentiment of tolerance for personal weakness voiced by Paul when he said, “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). More often than not, this sentiment is extended to sexual backsliders, closeted drinkers, and the occasional racially “mixed” baby of dubious parentage. To outsiders, it may seem hypocritical. But, to those of us who have lived in the region, it allows people with radically different social positions (often based on race, gender, and family background) to co-exist with at least the façade of decorum. It is in this space of public propriety, tempered with unspoken tolerance of private deviance, that Emma Jones was able to function in a society that *officially* did not accept such things as homosexuality.

This circle of friends sponsored a beach party on July 4, 1966 with 50 participants. In 1967, 200 showed up. By 1968, the event had doubled its size to 400. At this point, Emma’s beach party was large enough to catch the attention of the local police, who only required that the revelers be discreet and clean up the

trash afterwards. Local businesses had noticed that Gay visitors brought in a lot of money, which in itself is a great means for promoting good public relations (Laughery 274-5).

Emma Jones was a working model for how Straights and Gays could work together in the spirit of discretion, respect, and profit. Rather than being confrontational, the boys and girls of Emma Jones used festival to form social networks and create a climate of respect for Gays in a predominantly Straight Bible-Belt community. As with the San Francisco fundraiser-dances, Emma Jones parties would be the prototype for Circuit parties, and may even be considered their ancestor.

It is apparent that Gay liberation (and the Circuit) was much more than simply a movement the suddenly burst into existence in one place at one time. Things were happening across the US and abroad that signaled the emergence of a new Gay awareness. However, none of these people, organizations, or incidents gained national and international attention the way that Stonewall did.

1969: Stonewall

Like much of GLBT culture today, the Circuit has its roots in the legendary Stonewall Awakening.

The Stonewall Inn on 53 Christopher Street was a seedy Gay men's dance bar in Manhattan's Greenwich Village. Owned by the Mafia, it was an illegal juke joint posing as a legitimate business. Drinks were watered down. There was no running water, so glasses were rinsed in tubs of stale water and used again. Drugs were available if the buyer had the right connections. As shady as it was, the Stonewall Inn was the most popular male Gay bar in the Village, perhaps because it was the only one in New York City that allowed people to dance to music from its jukebox (Duberman 181-182).

Although the clientele was predominantly male, Stonewall's door staff admitted a very mixed crowd in terms of ethnicity, race, occupation, and gender (Straight men were turned away). All kinds frequented the Inn: nelly flamers, working-class men, Wall Street types, chicken hawks (older men in search of younger men and teenage boys), teenage boys, drag queens, some hippies, and a few women (Duberman 182-187).

The owners of Stonewall had a fairly comfortable relationship with the police of the Sixth Precinct. Once a week, an officer would stop by to pick up approximately \$2000 in cash. This meant that the police permitted the management to maintain the illusion that the Stonewall Inn was a private "bottle club" so that no liquor license was required (liquor sales were illegal in bottle clubs). \$2000 also meant that the police would announce their raids in advance,

and never have them during peak business hours. But just in case police showed up unannounced, a warning system of lights would notify customers to stop dancing. Bartenders would then grab the cash made from drink sales and melt into the crowd (Duberman 185, 194-195, Laughery 314).

On June 28, 1969 (the evening of the actress Judy Garland's⁶⁶ funeral), there was an unscheduled police raid on the Stonewall Inn at a little after 1 am. A crowd gathered to taunt the police, who were running people out and filling their paddy wagon with Stonewall staff and cross-dressers. That same crowd booed the arresters and cheered for the arrested, who posed for the crowd and waved like celebrities as they were ushered out of the bar. Tradition has it that trouble broke out when a police officer pushed a Lesbian dressed in men's clothing, and she pushed back (Hogan and Hudson 526, Loughery 316). Angry words led to bricks, rocks, bottles, and coins thrown at the officers (symbolizing the bribes that police demanded from Gay establishments). According to Loughery, the drag queen-turned-activist Sylvia Rivera yelled, "You already got the payoff, but here's some

⁶⁶ Actress Judy Garland was a Gay icon. She played Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, a story about exile and acceptance that many Gay folk saw as symbolic of their own lives. Gay people would identify each other in code as "friends of Dorothy." A song she sang in that movie, "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," held special importance in the hearts of many GLBT people who felt alienated from the "real world." It would not be too much to say that the wholesale adoption of the rainbow flag as the symbol for the GLBT community came in part because of the popularity of Judy Garland, *The Wizard of Oz*, and "Somewhere Over the Rainbow."

more!” as the coins were thrown. The police barricaded themselves in the bar until reinforcements arrived (Laughery 316-17, Hurewitz 6). Three days of civil insurrection ensued. Gay liberation, some 270 years in the making, had officially begun.

It was liberation, however, on Gay terms. Stonewall was a lesson in successful violence management. Nobody on either side was shot, and nobody was killed, although plenty of Gays (and some Straight allies) were beaten. Hilarity and silliness played an important role in keeping things from getting too far out of hand. In fact, Stonewall was just as much a street party as it was an insurrection.

For the most part, public resistance consisted of hitting the police in the ego with wit and humor rather than sticks and stones. Accounts of the Stonewall Awakening tell how Gay men⁶⁷ taunted law enforcement officers with performances of “camp” (exaggerated feminine speech performance and body language, usually adopted when one is saying something outrageous) and then running away (Kaiser 197-202). At one point, the riot police became unwitting cast members of street theater directed by drag queens, who were the stars of the

⁶⁷ Other than the notion that Stonewall started with a Lesbian’s resistance, there is little mention of women in the Uprising. This does not mean that women did not play a more substantial role in the insurgency. Their rare appearance on record could be due to erasure by the press or the men who wrote the history of Gay liberation.

show. A chorus line of drag queens danced in front of the police, high-kicking Rockettes-style in a row, while singing the following ditty:

We are the Stonewall Girls
We wear our hair in curls
We wear no underwear
We show our pubic hair...
We wear our dungarees
Above our nelly knees! (Duberman 200-201)

In a very short time after the uprising, city authorities decriminalized Gay bars (at least in theory), and laws against cross-dressing were effectively abolished.

The success of Stonewall was a combination of minimum violence with maximum laughter. Some reporters in the mainstream press helped the cause immensely by portraying *all* of the insurgents as Stonewall Girls: saucy, limp-wristed pansies who relentlessly ridiculed the cops. The incident was written up as if it were the performance of a slapstick comedy routine.⁶⁸ Police were portrayed as hapless “straight men” to the queeny comedians. *The Daily News*, the largest newspaper in the country at that time, printed an article, “Homo Nest Raided, Queen Bees Are Stinging Mad”:

⁶⁸ In “Gay Power Comes to Sheridan Square” published in *The Village Voice* (July 3, 1969), Lucian Truscott says that the unrest on Saturday was “led by a group of gay cheerleaders.” “He added, “The scene was a command performance for queers.” (Bloom and Reines 598).

According to the reports, the Stonewall Inn...was a mecca for the homosexual element in the Village who wanted nothing but a private little place where they could congregate, drink, dance, and do whatever little girls do when they get together...The crowd began to get out of hand, eye witnesses said. Then, without warning, Queen Power exploded with all the fury of a gay atomic bomb. Queens, princesses, and ladies-in-waiting began hurling anything they could lay their polished, manicured fingernails on. Bobby pins, compacts, curlers, lipstick tubes and other femme fatale missiles were flying in the direction of the cops. The lilies of the valley had become carnivorous jungle plants...Flushed with the excitement of battle, a fellow called Gloria pranced around like Wonder Woman, while several Florence Nightingales administered first aid to the fallen warriors. There were some assorted scratches and bruises, but nothing serious was suffered by these honeys turned Madwomen of Chaillot.⁶⁹

Although it is easy to read the article as a put-down of Gay men, the exaggeration of feminine traits in the insurgents (“Bobby pins, compacts, curlers, lipstick tubes and other femme fatale missiles” instead of rocks, bottles, bricks, and coins, for example) highlights the ineptitude of the police far more than the decadence of the protesters. As such, the article also fails to mention the Gay men, Lesbians, and their Straight allies who were beaten senseless by the cops. Portrayed as buffoons more so than bullies, the police were the butt of the joke.

It is important to keep in mind that the generations living in 1969 had been taught that cross-dressing was humorous, witty, and harmless. This was the early days of television when there were only three channels to choose from: ABC,

⁶⁹ The article was written by Jerry Lisker and published on July 6, 1969. Reprinted from a photocopy of the article’s first page in *Completely Queer* (Hogan and Hudson 527).

NBC, and CBS. The nation would watch Milton Berle dress in drag for laughs on the wildly popular *Milton Berle Show*. Comedienne Lucille Ball would occasionally dress up like a man on *I Love Lucy*. Larry and Curly of the Three Stooges did drag, as did Bugs Bunny of cartoon fame. Speaking of cartoons, children would grow up laughing at Chip ‘n’ Dale, the effeminate male chipmunk couple, and the pink theatrical lion Snagglepuss, quite possibly the campiest queen on Saturday morning television. In all of these instances, cross-dressers and effeminate male characters are the heroes.

As angry as the riot police got when taunted, I would imagine that the absurdity of the situation did not escape them or their superiors. Imagine the conversations they had at home with their spouses, how they probably laughed with their co-workers afterwards at the antics of drag queens dancing before them, once tempers cooled at the end of the day. Had they *not* considered the protesters to be silly and basically harmless in their impunity, had the Stonewall Girls been perceived as a real threat, people would surely have been killed. Most likely, however, it would be years before many of those same officers would entertain the idea that just maybe the protesters were *right*.

Walking down Christopher Street on the days after the incident, poet Alan Ginsberg said that homosexuals had “lost that wounded look” that characterized traumatized souls (Truscott, “Gay Power Comes to Sheridan Square” 599). Just

like today, GLBT folk were damaged by their own internal feelings of self-hatred that could be just as damning and hurtful as the words and actions of their external oppressors. A Gay liberation parade was organized a few weeks later. Exactly one year after Stonewall, the first official Gay pride parade was held in Greenwich Village, which was followed by a dance party.

This 1970 post-pride parade dance party was the first precursor to Circuit parties thrown during Gay Pride celebrations.⁷⁰

"Stonewall," shorthand for the social unrest and subsequent events, is now enshrined as a pivotal moment in the GLBT community's folk history. Lesbians and Gays quickly went from being socially passive and invisible to politically active and outrageous, a response meant to shake up and undermine the stigma of homosexuality. As public displays of self-worth, pride parades are street theater where many GLBT folks flaunt their sexuality in the tradition of one pissed-off butch Lesbian, a motley coin-throwing mob, and a chorus line of Stonewall Girls.

⁷⁰ At least three pride weekends are also full-fledged Circuit parties: the San Diego Zoo Party, Toronto Prism, and New York Pride. Most Pride celebrations in other major cities include dance parties that are patterned much like Circuit parties.

CHAPTER 4

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE CIRCUIT(S)

When you're close to tears, remember
Someday it will all be over
One day we're gonna get so high
And though it's darker than December,
What's ahead is a different color
We're gonna get so high

“High” by the Lighthouse Family

This chapter will look at the various trends that followed Stonewall that initiated the rise of the first Circuit, which began to expand but almost stopped completely due to AIDS, was reborn as a new and improved Circuit, started self-destructing a second time due to frequent GHB drug overdoses at parties, and is currently rebounding yet again.

I chose the Stonewall Awakening as the crucial moment for the beginning of the Circuit. This does not mean, however, that there was no discernable precedent. Just as there was a circuit of drag balls in the eastern part of the US during the 1930s, so were there probably different party circuits between the '30s and 1969. But the necessity for secrecy makes it difficult to establish these pre-Circuit circuits as historical fact. In the Southern US, there were annual Gay

events in New Orleans for Mardi Gras since the 1950s, and there is proof positive for the Emma Jones parties in Pensacola, Florida between 1968 and 1974. These two annual events could be considered part of a Southern party circuit pre-dating Stonewall.

But Circuit parties as we know of them today have some features that came into existence only after the Stonewall Awakening:

- 1) Large-scale, semi-public annual theme parties dedicated strictly to dance
- 2) Sound and light technologies that were perfected during the disco era (1972-1981)
- 3) The prevalence of intoxicants other than alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, and cocaine
- 4) The shift in popular dance from couples to individual expression
- 5) The rise of the DJ and the art of “mixing” songs in an unbroken series
- 6) Display of the fit and shirtless male body on the dance floor
- 7) The tendency for festivities to go on for a weekend

It would not be unreasonable to assume that the major impetus for the formation of the Circuit was the need for public intimacy. Circuit parties are not orgies, although a minority of them has areas set aside for just that purpose, and sexual behavior might occur on the dance floor during almost any event. But the Circuit would generate an environment where Gay men could get intoxicated,

flirt, display their physiques, and find romance in a safe space where they made their own rules.

After Stonewall: sex, sex, sex

The Stonewall Awakening was a sexual bugle call for homosexual men across the country that paralleled the Sexual Revolution of the 1960s. Immediately following Stonewall, there was a marked increase in public sexual activity, especially in NYC. No longer in its infancy, the young Gay movement rushed into unrestrained puberty as men claimed new sexual territories throughout Manhattan, legal and otherwise. The dark forest of “the Rambles” in Central Park and the large empty warehouses on abandoned West Side piers became erotic zones laden with potential thrills and real danger. Queer-bashers would seek victims there. The warehouses were full of safety hazards that could lead to injury or even death as men fell through holes in the floor, sometimes into the Hudson River (Lovett).⁷¹

But the chance of physical harm did little to prevent visitors from going there at all hours—perhaps danger and a sense of adventure made the lure of the

⁷¹ Joseph Lovett’s documentary, *Gay Sex in the 70s*, admirably covers the excesses of those times. So far as I can tell, it is the most comprehensive authority on the subject available.

forbidden even more enticing. Trucks at the piers became pitch-black “back rooms” as men would pack into their trailers once the sun went down (Lovett). The notoriety of the West Side Piers and the trucks parked there resonated in the sexual culture of Gay male communities. Washington, DC had an immensely popular Gay club called the Pier, and Man’s Country (a Manhattan bathhouse, which also had a branch in Chicago) had a full-sized model of a truck on its 9th floor (Loughery 360-362).

Anonymous sex was available at a glance, and venereal diseases such as gonorrhea, syphilis, hepatitis-B, and intestinal parasites were rampant. It would be unfair to say that all of this was a result of Gay liberation only; the Sexual Revolution had already ushered in a rise in STDs before Stonewall. A 1964 study by the New York Academy of Medicine blamed the increase on several factors, including the automobile, feminist movement, breakdown in family values, and homosexuals who wanted same-sex love “recognized as a noble way of life” (Kaiser 150). No doubt the Gay male community’s new-found liberation after Stonewall aggravated the problem.

The rise in venereal disease infections did not prevent men from “cruising” each other (looking for sex) everywhere they could, including the free clinic where they were treated for sexually transmitted diseases. Far from

discouraging sex, STDs were often dismissed with a shrug—everything had a cure. Mel Cheren describes the prevailing attitude:

Most of us were not particularly worried at the time. In fact, our biggest complaint was that something nasty usually meant that you were not supposed to have sex until it cleared up, which might be several weeks. When you were used to having sex with somebody new almost every day, or even several times a day, it was tough to be told that you had to take a few weeks off (Cheren 272).

For those who wanted a degree of comfort and security when they went out hunting for sex, many Gay bars had back rooms for sexual encounters, and bathhouses like Man's Country would openly cater exclusively to Gay men.⁷² Some of them, such as the Club chain of bathhouses (started in 1965 in Cleveland, OH), made a conscious effort before Stonewall as homosexual-friendly establishments that were respectable, clean, and discreet. In Manhattan, the Continental baths (which opened in 1968) and the St. Marks Baths were stylish health spas with dance floors, bars, and live performances. "My career took off when I sang at the Continental Baths in New York," Bette Midler said in 1972 (Laughery 359-60). Midler performed there with Barry Manilow at the piano (Kaiser 248), thus earning her nickname, "Bathhouse Betty" (she released an

⁷² Gay bathhouses existed well before 1969, but were usually seen by authorities as illegal businesses that could be shut down at any time. The Stonewall Awakening helped the bathhouse industry become a legally valid institution that would only be threatened again by the AIDS epidemic and consequential public panic.

album with the same name in 1998). Singers Melba Moore, Cab Calloway, Tiny Tim, and comedian Dick Gregory also performed at the Continental Baths (Laughery 360).

Early 1970s: the first Circuit (the Manhattan-Fire Island loop)

The history of the Circuit is actually a history of interrelated *circuits*. The first Circuit is the seasonal movement of Gay men from discos in Manhattan to dance clubs on Fire Island during the summer; it began in the early 1970s almost immediately after the Stonewall Awakening. The second Circuit is the movement of men from city to city across the US to attend Manhattan-inspired *Circuit parties*. It started in the late 1970s, about the same time as house culture.

Manhattan would be the cradle of the Gay men's dance movement. It was a haven for homosexuals since at least the 1890s and had a vibrant community that knew how to entertain. Manhattan is the epicenter of American theater, the home of Broadway, off-Broadway, and the arts associated with theater, such as professional dance and choreography. It is also the capitol of fashion. As the trendsetter for the nation, it is no wonder the Harlem drag balls were so brilliant, or that the Stonewall Awakening caught the attention of the rest of the country. Because of its visibility, New York City rather than San Francisco, pre-Nazi

Berlin, or any other large metropolis was responsible for ushering in the age of public awareness of Gay folk as a people rather than simply a deviant group of criminals, sinners, or the mentally ill.

Just as the Stonewall Awakening cannot be separated from illegal and scandalous activities, including bootleg alcohol and cross-dressing, Gay liberation in its initial stages was fueled in part by illegal drugs and funded by shirtless dancing men. One of the first organizations to form after Stonewall was the Gay Liberation Front, a politically aware activist group with a reputation for using marijuana and acid (Clendinen and Nagourney 46). In July of 1969, the GLF opened Alternate U, its own “school” for political debate and community awareness in an industrial loft on Fourteenth Street. Tired of going to bars owned by Straight people who were not always sympathetic to Gay folk, the GLF began holding dances there in December for the Gay community. These dances drew both men and women. So far as I can tell, this is when Gay men (and some women) began taking off their shirts while they danced.⁷³

Another group, the Gay Activists Alliance, began holding fundraiser dances in May of 1971. Like the GLF, the GAA used its facilities, an abandoned firehouse on Wooster Street, for committee meetings and social gatherings,

⁷³ In April of 1970, the GLF women organized the first women-only dances as alternatives to the overwhelming numbers of men at most Gay liberation functions (Teal 42).

complete with strobe lights, coat check, and occasionally go-go-boys (Teal 41-42, Clendinen and Nagourney 76). The bay for fire trucks was spacious and packed with mostly Gay men. For a time, it was New York's most popular Gay male dance venue. Clendinen and Nagourney describe a scene that is strikingly familiar to Circuit boys and girls today:

On any Saturday night, people [standing on the spiral staircase formally used by firefighters to access their trucks] would take in the expanse of men, over a thousand of them, shirtless, shoulder to shoulder, arms flying in the air, high on LSD or [Q]ualudes or Seconals or black beauties or marijuana. They were pounding sneakers on the cement floor, under flashing colored and strobe lights, and to a sound system "that the Fillmore might envy," as Randy Wicker wrote in *Gay* newspaper, referring to the rock and roll concert hall across town...it was to be the progenitor of the huge discos that later appeared in New York. Suddenly, politics was glamorous. People who never thought of going to a GAA Thursday night meeting or a zap⁷⁴ would line up to dance in what was by day the headquarters of the most active Gay rights group in the country and by night New York's premier Gay club (Clendinen and Nagourney 76-77).

Randy Wicker's words are almost prophetic. In only a few years, the Fillmore East would become the most famous Gay male dance club in history.

The Gay men's dance movement would soon leave political activism to explore a privately constructed Gay identity. In turn, this identity would lead to changes in appearance and behavior that provoked public reaction without having to wave a sign or chant a slogan. Dance clubs were opened in Manhattan that

⁷⁴ Disruptive, unannounced protests (Hogan and Hudson 595).

catered exclusively to Gay men, who then began developing their own post-Stonewall culture away from the public eye. The insistence on privacy and segregation from women and Straight men should not be seen as contrary to Gay liberation. Rather, it was *a result of* Gay liberation. The Gay men's dance movement could not have occurred without the confidence and pride that Gay men felt as a consequence of the Stonewall Awakening. "One of the profound changes wrought by Gay liberation," states Michael Bronski, "was the permission granted to Gay men to like themselves" (*The Pleasure Principle* 103). But before Gay men could like themselves, they needed to get to know each other, on their own terms and in their own venues.

Initially, "the Circuit" as its own cultural entity probably referred to the weekly calendar for Gay men in-the-know (called "circuit queens"⁷⁵) to visit Gay-friendly hair salons, restaurants, bars, dance clubs, and bathhouses on Manhattan Island that were considered *chic* (Levine 60). It would also include the seasonal pilgrimage to Fire Island in the summer and the newly legal clubs *du jour* in Manhattan during the off-season. This inter-island pilgrimage made up the first post-Stonewall dance circuit. Andrew Holleran describes the migratory pattern of these early Circuit participants in his novel, *Dancer from the Dance*:

⁷⁵ The first reference to circuit queens I can find is in Andrew Holleran's novel about Manhattan-Fire Island Gay male culture in the early to mid-1970s, *Dancer from the Dance* (Holleran 152).

We would not stop dancing. We moved with the regularity of the Pope from the city to Fire Island in the summer, where we danced till the fall; and then, like the geese flying south, the butterflies dying in the dunes, we found some new place in Manhattan and danced all winter there (Holleran 111).

Manhattan clubs became progressively more and more grand, legendary, and exclusive. Venues such as the 10 Steps, Loft, 12 West, Flamingo, Salvation, Paradise Garage, and the legendary Saint have become mythical landmarks in GLBT history. These clubs nurtured a new Gay dance culture that would change the face of popular dance music and club culture around the world.

The first huge Gay dance space was the Sanctuary, a converted German Baptist church on W. 43rd Street that opened in 1971. The DJ booth was placed where the altar had been, and the space was filled with pornographic and pagan imagery. Another space dedicated to religious inversion was Salvation (located, appropriately, in Hell's Kitchen), which featured a grand portrait of Satan, served drinks in chalices, and had pews lining the walls (Collin 11).⁷⁶

⁷⁶ The name "Salvation" has survived in the Gay male club scene, first in Miami, which had a legendary club by the same name, and in the Salvation parties thrown in Britain and other European countries. Repetition of names is a common occurrence. In Columbus, Ohio, two of its clubs were named after Manhattan venues: 7 West and the Garage. The Monster in Miami took its name from the club of the same name on Fire Island.

A smaller, more exclusive space was the Loft on 647 Broadway, a racially-inclusive private club that was actually the big loft apartment belonging to David Mancuso who transformed it into a dance venue for the entire weekend. Featuring free food, spiked punch, a great sound system, and R&B dance music in the disco format, the Loft was a weekend retreat, a second home for those “Loft babies” who were invited to join since Mancuso opened his doors in 1970 (Silcott 20). The Loft did not serve liquor, which meant that there was no need for a liquor license (12 West, Flamingo, and the Saint would follow suit) and it could stay open as long as it wanted. The high point for an “evening” of dancing at the Loft moved from 11 pm-midnight to 6 in the morning, marking a shift away from late evening-early morning parties to marathon dance sessions at all hours for more than one day.

As well as continuously mixing one song into the next, DJs learned to play the music according to the intoxicants of choice. Howard Merritt, a DJ at the Flamingo, would call drug dealers and ask them, “What’s been your big seller this week?”

Then I would know what kind of music to play that weekend. If they sold more mda [sic], the music had to be more high energy. Cocaine and speed, that’s the kind of music I played. But if they sold a lot of [angel] dust [PCP], then people weren’t coming to hear me—they wanted to hear Richie Rivera, because he played a lot if heavy music (Cheren 163).

One tradition that can be traced back to these times (or possibly even further back) is color-themed parties. We know that the Flamingo had them in the 1970s. White, Black, and Red Parties would become staples of more than one club and eventually more than one city as Gay Manhattan club culture spread.⁷⁷ Today, many cities still have Black, White Parties, but only a few are widely regarded as Circuit events, such as the White Parties in Palm Springs, Miami, and New York, the Black Parties in New York and Amsterdam, and the Red Party in Montreal. Other colors have made their debut as well, with the Philadelphia Blue Ball, Dallas Purple Party, and Amsterdam Orange Ball.

Just as the isle of Manhattan sprouted a host of openly-Gay dance venues after Stonewall, so did Fire Island. A disco song by the all-male and sexually-ambiguous Village People gives some of the club names:

It's the place where you'll find me, the sun and sea
the place where love is free, yeah
We can scream, but let's sing
we can do each other's thing, yeah
Groove at the Ice Palace
Get on down at the Monster
Been there, been there
been there at the Blue Whale
Peckin', I'm peckin'
peckin' at the Sandpiper
Pumpin', I'm pumpin'
pumpin' at the hotel

⁷⁷ So far, I have heard of 1970s color-themed parties in New York, Columbus OH, Boston, and San Francisco. I suspect there were more of them in other cities.

Fire Island--it's a funky weekend
a funky funky weekend
Don't go in the bushes, someone might grab ya
Don't go in the bushes, someone might stab ya
(“Fire Island” by the Village People)

The presence of venues such as the Ice Palace, Monster, Blue Whale, and Sandpiper on a barrier island with an off-season population of only a few thousand gives some indication of how popular Fire Island was during summer. The fact that this song also refers to violence indicates that there was still a sense of uneasiness brought on by random Gay-bashing in this sun-and-fun Gay resort.

The issue of building a nonconformist Gay "butch" or “manly” masculinity became important in Gay discourse, expression, and fashion immediately after Stonewall. Plenty of men were ready to transform their bodies and attitudes. In part, this was a conscious move by Gay men to protect themselves from attack, to repel would-be aggressors with visible signs of physical strength. It was also a means of erotic attraction, to beautify the body by clothing it in muscle and catch the eye of other Gay men.

This marks a pivotal moment in GLBT history: effeminacy was no longer necessary as a key marker for homosexuality. Unlike molly houses or drag balls, clubs in the Manhattan-Fire Island Circuit openly celebrated muscular and manly Gay men, who would appear on the streets and the beach by the thousands. At night, they would take off their shirts in the clubs in a display of raw sensuality

and assertiveness that shocked the awareness of anyone who witnessed them *en masse*. Gay men made themselves the objects of their own desire rather than wistfully lusting after some Straight masculine ideal. This ushered the age of the "Gay clone," a mustached, nicely muscled stud made famous (and gently ridiculed) by the song "Macho Man" by the Village People:

Body, it's so hot, my body
Body, love to pop my body
Body, love to please my body
Body, don't you tease my body
Body, you'll adore my body
Body, come explore my body
Body, made by God, my body
Body, it's so good, my body

You can tell a macho, he has a funky walk
His western shirts and leather, always look so boss
Funky with his body, he's a king
Call him Mister Eagle,⁷⁸ dig his chains
You can best believe that, he's a macho man
Likes to be the leader, he never dresses grand

Hey! Hey! Hey, hey, hey!
Macho, macho man
I've got to be, a macho man
Macho, macho man
I've got to be a macho!

The deeply internalized stereotypes of homosexuals as "nelly fags" (effeminate men) or sneaky perverts were challenged on and off the dance floor

⁷⁸ The Eagle is a chain of Gay Leather bars, where clothing made of leather, harnesses, and chains would be acceptable attire.

by the hypermasculinity of the Gay clone. For the general public, however, effeminate stereotypes were still the rule.

Effeminacy in the Gay male community did not disappear with the rise of the macho man. Nelly traditions going back to the days of the molly houses survived quite well in the first Circuit. Men still gave each other “girl” names. Hilarious effeminate behavior in the form of “camp” was regularly interwoven in men’s performance of the Gay male identity, including the performance of muscular clones.

The influence of the original Manhattan-Fire Island Circuit spread and became standard behavior outside of NYC as visitors flocked there and brought Circuit culture back home with them. In response to DJs in the Gay dance scene and the popularity of the music they made, record companies produced extended-play versions of dance songs, technicians improved turntables, and clubs invested heavily in lights and sound equipment.⁷⁹ All of these things contributed to a new industry dedicated to developing and enhancing techniques of communal ecstasy.

Gay club culture quickly spread beyond the Gay community into the mainstream with the popularity of disco music in the 1970s. The influence of the Gay men’s dance movement on disco can be seen in the disco scene’s relaxed attitude toward drugs, dance floor sensuality, and casual attitude towards sensual

⁷⁹ This is also the beginning of the technology that would be used to create disco and house culture.

dance floor expression in clubs like Studio 54. This included, of course, a more tolerant attitude toward Gay people.

People of the Village

One musical group stood out above the rest as the kings of disco and the ambassadors of Gay male club sensibilities in the late '70s: the aforementioned Village People.⁸⁰ Made up of six physically-fit male singers from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, the Village People strutted onstage and danced as they sang, a fusion of theatrical chorus line and pop music with a dash of burlesque. They dressed up as masculine icons: the Indian, Cowboy, Biker, Construction Worker, Soldier, and Cop.⁸¹ The lyrics to their songs are hilarious and full of sexual innuendos that would not always register in the minds of most Straights, but were easily understood by Gay men. There was one thing that the Village People would not do, however. They would not perform in an effeminate manner.

⁸⁰ Even their name with the word "Village" in it is evocative of Greenwich Village in Manhattan, the neighborhood in which the Stonewall Awakening took place. Besides "Fire Island" and "Macho Man," their repertoire of songs include tongue-in-cheek titles (and lyrics) such as "YMCA," "In the Navy," "San Francisco," and "Sodom and Gomorrah."

⁸¹ This is a reversal of the sensibilities of the molly houses, where men with masculine occupations discarded or downplayed their butchness in favor of maiden names and identities. In the Village People's incarnation of Gay identity, masculine occupations were accessorized as symbols of eroticized manliness rather than discarded.

From the perspective of the Gay male community, the Village People were a band of butch Gay brothers that undermined the stereotype of the flaming queen. They were the harbinger of the muscular, macho Circuit queen.

But those same macho mannerisms could be interpreted in a very different way by heterosexuals. The absence of feminine behavior allowed the Straight community to assume that maybe the Village People were not *really* Gay. Uptight Straight Americans could accept the Village People with open arms, as long they could assure themselves that the group was a clever joke. The Village People themselves would not say for certain whose team they played for, no matter how obvious their team affiliation appeared to Gay folk. In fact, they were careful to encourage ambiguity. They portrayed themselves simultaneously as sexy, possibly Straight, fun-loving dudes in costume *and* as living symbols of Gay men's resistance to the pansy stereotype.

It would be a mistake for GLBT historians to assume that the Village People were simply closet cases or cheap parodies—they were so much more. When they danced in their butch outfits and sang with strong masculine voices in front of Straight audiences, these six men contributed to the liberation of Gay people in much the same way as the “Stonewall Girls” who danced in feminine drag and sang in front of riot police. The Village People confronted America with macho muscle, teased its citizens, and dared them to laugh. The Indian, Cowboy,

Biker, Construction Worker, Soldier, and Cop inspired the world to have fun with sexual identity and follow Gay sensibilities of hilarity, tolerance, sensuality, and nonviolence. At the time, I personally doubt they could have been as effective in lowering the barriers between Gay and Straight if they had all been out-and-out Gay, or if they had identified only as Straight.

Disco Sucks!

But any hopes of Gays and Straights forming a united club culture based on Gay values were short-lived. Thinly-veiled homophobic backlash contributed to the "death" of disco in the late 1970s. "Disco Sucks" and "Kill Disco" were common slogans in a time when beating up queers was still a popular sport among bored Straight jocks. Chicago radio DJ Steve Dahl called for a "disco destruction army" to verbally assault DJs that played disco music. In one publicity stunt, Dahl gave away 100 tickets to a Village People concert so that disco-haters could harass the performers. "Macho Man" was no longer a laughing matter unless the laughter was filled with distain and intolerance. "Disco music is a disease," Dahl warned his minions as he called for the extinction of the genre (Brewster and

Broughton 268).⁸² Such language and its underlying edge of hatred would soon be used in describing GRID (Gay-Related Immunity Deficiency, an early name for AIDS).

On July 12, 1979, Dahl pulled his biggest anti-disco stunt: he supervised a “Disco Demolition” rally at Chicago’s Comiskey Park during a baseball double-header between the Detroit Tigers and the Chicago White Sox. After the first game, Dahl (in paramilitary gear) went on the field and burned several thousand disco albums that fans had brought in exchange for reduced admission. The album-burning excited the spectators into a frenzy—thousands of them poured onto the field, ripped up the turf, set more fires, and attempted to storm the locker rooms of the baseball players while chanting “Disco Sucks!”⁸³

One of the reasons why Gay men were feared was because they, too, sucked and perversely enjoyed sucking. The pivotal event for the ceremonial and Nazi-esque album burning took place on a sports field and carried militaristic overtones, all markers of true manhood in the exorcism of Sodom from their midst.

⁸² This is not to say that Dahl himself was a homophobe, at least not consciously. The movement he called for, however, would not be friendly at all to Gays or, for that matter, Blacks and Latinos.

⁸³ The Tigers refused to go back onto the field. The second game was cancelled and the White Sox forfeited.

Mel Cheren, “Godfather of Disco” and founder of West End Records, sums up the backlash:

The music market is largely a zero-sum game, so as disco rose, everything else had to fall. This infuriated those who had dominated music for years—rock critics, DJs, and [sic] producers, and lots of disenfranchised fans. Rock had defined two generations of white, middle-class Straight baby-boomers, particularly guys. It spoke to them and for them, and now it was in danger of being relegated to a niche market itself by a new style dominated by black musicians and Gay promoters, producers, and tastemakers. As the disco sweep turned into a tidal wave, a near panic set in. Beneath the bitter complaints that disco was mindless, hedonistic, repetitive, pounding—exactly what critics had said about rock itself in its early years—there was this deeper complaint: disco was black and Hispanic. Disco was mindless and Gay. Disco sucked (Cheren 245).

Irrational hatred of disco was not limited to Chicago—it became political and international in scope. According to Brewster and Broughton,

All over the world, the disco menace was confronted; right-wing Americans denounced it as morally degraded and probably a form of communist mind control; communist countries banned it as decadent and capitalist. Perhaps the most bizarre expression of antidisco sentiment came from Turkey, where scientists at the University of Ankara “proved” that disco turned pigs deaf and made mice homosexual (Brewster and Broughton 269).

Like homosexuality, disco was a threat to public health and national security.

It should be noted that the rise of rap music occurred at about the same time as disco-bashing. Homophobic lyrics are present in the very first rap hit,

“Rapper’s Delight” by the Sugar Hill Gang, which contained the following lyrics describing Superman:

He’s a fairy
I do suppose
Flying through the air
In panty hose

Homophobia in Hip-Hop today may be seen in part as Black parallel reaction to White backlash against disco. The anti-disco crusade also had a racist edge to it. It is important to note that disco was not only perceived as Gay, it was also perceived as Black. There were not many African American folk (if any) in Dahl’s Disco Destruction Army, and for good reason.

The violent masculinity found in lyrics and lifestyles of infamous “gangsta” rappers may have its origins in a Straight Black male response to “Disco Sucks!” But rap music owes a debt to disco— “Rapper’s Delight,” was created when the Sugar Hill Gang sampled a non-vocal version of a disco hit called “Good Times” by Chic and chanted their own lyrical poetry to it.⁸⁴

But disco music survived (often called “urban music” to avoid the backlash) and flourished in the Gay male community. It would eventually transform seamlessly into house music. By this time, the first generation of the

⁸⁴ Other popular rap song sampled disco hits: Notorious B.I.G.’s “Mo Money Mo Problems” sampled from Diana Ross’ song dedicated to Gay pride entitled “I’m Coming Out.” The B.I.G. version, however, has no references to the Gay community.

Circuit was already well established. With ever-present threat of Gay-bashing and incidences like the anti-disco riot of 1979, the Gay men's dance movement had plenty of incentive to keep itself removed from the general public.

Even though it was concealed from the public eye, this first Circuit had a huge effect on the Gay men's perception of themselves across the US, Canada, Australia, and Europe. We may think of the early Gay male scene in Post-Stonewall Manhattan as embryonic and fragile, protected from harm's way in social spaces that catered to Gay men only, at least in its first couple of years.⁸⁵

Once the Circuit was firmly established in Manhattan at the end of the '70s, two clubs set the pace that the Circuit would follow for decades to come: the Paradise Garage and the Saint.

1980-1985: the shining glory of the Saint

While the first Circuit was going strong, the super-club called the Saint was built. Like the Flamingo and other popular venues, it was members-only (a limited number of guests were allowed). The Saint could easily hold a few thousand revelers, and had one of the most sophisticated sound and light systems

⁸⁵ We can see the same need for privacy that inspired the women's music movement. Many women's music festivals are women-only spaces. Sometimes a community needs privacy so that its members can determine for themselves who they are, what they want, and how they choose to behave.

for its time. If the Stonewall Inn was the bottom of the barrel for nightclubs, the Saint was the top of the line. Many people who remember the early days claim that the Saint represented everything grand about the Circuit.

When we read the invitation for membership that the Saint's creator/owner Bruce Mailman had sent out to his friends, we see that an evening in the club was not meant to be a purely secular experience:

Since the beginning of recorded history the male members of the species have joined together in ritual dance. Adorned, semi-naked with rhythm instruments, they used this tribal rite to celebrate their Gods and themselves. The Saint has been created to perform the mystery—to continue the rite (Clendinen and Nagourney 442).

Club culture tends to be geographically volatile. The opening of the Saint contributed to the demise of the Flamingo,⁸⁶ formerly the “only” place to go. We still see this dynamic today in every major city, as notoriously fickle Gay men flock to “the latest flavor” of club venues and leave old clubs in financial ruin.

The Saint (opened in 1980, closed in 1988) is a topic of Gay men's folklore that borders on the mythical. DJ Warren Gluck said that the Saint was all about creating a rich aesthetic and transcendental experience. "When you stepped onto the dance floor, you walked into the music," he told me.⁸⁷ On certain

⁸⁶ Opened in 1974, the popularity of the Flamingo necessitated a members-only policy. According to Mel Cheren, it was also the first place to host a remarkably beautiful clientele (162).

⁸⁷ Interview, December 30, 2002

weekends, the Saint's crowd would dance from Saturday night to Monday morning. By 1980, the pattern for the then-embryonic Circuit had been set. Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton (*Last Night a DJ Saved My Life*) describe it thus:

The Saint's dancefloor [sic] would be a mass of bodies, each sculpted to perfection, moving in tribal unison. To the strains of the club's ornate music, these beautiful men would proceed to get utterly trashed--on angel dust [PCP], Quaaludes, ecstasy, cocaine, amphetamines. They were Greek gods with drug habits (Brewster and Broughton 197).

The Saint took its name from the St. Marks Baths, which was owned by Bruce Mailman who was also the principle owner of the Saint. The St. Marks Baths took its name from St. Marks Place, the street on which it is located. In turn, St. Marks Place took *its* name from St. Mark's-on-the-Bowery, a church located a couple of blocks north on East 10th Street.

The building that became the Saint (105 Second Avenue) had formerly been the Fillmore East, a theater in which many '60s rock musicians had performed.⁸⁸ After a five million dollar facelift, complete with a state-of-the-art

⁸⁸ The Fillmore East was named after the Fillmore, a dance hall turned concert hall in San Francisco. Both Fillmores were under the direction of promoter Bill Graham, who closed them in 1971. Before the Fillmore, it was the Loews Commodore, and before that, it belonged to a Yiddish theater troupe (Clendinen and Nagourney 442). The building which housed the Saint sits across the street from a church that is still there today. What was once the Saint is now a bank and dormitory. The Saint Marks Baths is an apartment building. There is nothing in place that indicates their former identities in the businesses that replaced them; no plaques, memorials, nothing.

sound system, DJ equipment, and light fixtures that included a planetarium projector, the Saint was truly a heavenly place to dance. A huge dome hung over the dance floor; the lights and planetarium played upon its surface. People who had gone to the Saint in its heyday said that there has never been a club that could come close to it in style and sophistication.

The Saint is also remembered as holy ground. Brewster and Broughton have this quote from an interview with an unnamed clubber: “It was the headiest experience I’ve ever had in my life...And it is unrivaled still. It was liberating, spiritually uplifting. That’s where I learned to love my brothers” (Brewster and Broughton 196).

It had its flaws, however. The Saint would not initially let women in for any reason whatsoever (the more democratic Garage would let in women, but only in small numbers). Unlike Stonewall, it was a refuge only for those who could afford membership or were sponsored by members. Its sophistication came with a price tag. But consider these factors: the Gay club scene was occasionally targeted by crazed homophobes, drug use was a given,⁸⁹ and Gay men wanted a space where they could be themselves without having to watch their backs. It was not entirely without reason that these clubs were so exclusive. In my own

⁸⁹ Several Gay Manhattan dance clubs did not sell liquor before the advent of AIDS because it was not the intoxicant of choice. Since liquor was not sold, there was no need to get a liquor license.

experience (as recently as 1998), I can remember when Gay dance clubs in Columbus, Ohio had no signs in front so that they could prevent random acts of violence against their clientele.

Besides being celestial in sound and sight, the Saint also catered to the sexual appetites of its clientele. A balcony that looked down on the dance floor was the place to have sex between dances. In *My Life and the Paradise Garage*, a book about the origins of the Gay dance club scene, Mel Cheren describes the infamous balcony:

From the grand balcony you would gaze at the constellations of stars on the immense planetarium, the dance floor pulsing below...Most of the men on the balcony were not really there for the view, however...The balcony was essentially a big orgy room, and for most guests a trip up to the balcony became almost obligatory. On a typical night you might spend a couple of hours dancing, and then, high as a kite, you'd zip up to the balcony for a quickie...Then after trysting up there in heaven, and smoking a dusted joint [marijuana laced with PCP] or snorting some coke, you'd come back down to the dance floor for another round. The balcony changed everything about the disco experience, and, in my opinion, not for the better. The definition of a good night ceased being whether you had danced yourself into delirium, but whether you had scored (Cheren 278).

The apparent incongruity between the Saint's name and the libertine atmosphere of the balcony is not unique in the history of Gay sexual geography. Salvation in Miami took its name (already associated with the former Gay dance venue in NYC) from the Salvation Army, who owned the building previously. These names reflect a common theme in Gay men's dance culture: dance liberates

both the body (in terms of sensual pleasure) and soul (brings us spiritually in touch with the cosmos and each other). They are also examples of a fondness for wordplay, irony, and scandalous speech. We see this from the very beginning of the first Circuit, with club names such as the 12 Steps (a double entendre with the Alcoholics Anonymous sobriety program) and the Flamingo (“flaming” refers to a Gay man who exaggerates the behavior of the opposite sex; flamingos are usually portrayed as pink).

The sexual openness of the Saint and tolerance of intoxicants did not mean, however, that anything went. A high level of etiquette was expected from guests. Cigarettes and drinks were forbidden on the dance floor. Members had no problem telling offenders point blank to follow the rules or leave the club.

Both the Saint and St. Marks Baths were the cream of the crop in their respective genres. They both blurred the distinctions between bathhouses and dance clubs. Just as the Saint had its balcony for quick encounters, St. Marks sometimes had dance music for the benefit of its clientele.

In terms of age, the bathhouse came before the mega-club. St. Marks Baths was built on the same site as the last city residence of James Fenimore Cooper. It opened as a bathhouse in 1913 and was named the St. Marks Russian and Turkish Baths. The property was bought by Mailman in 1979, renovated and renamed the New St. Marks Baths.

The tradition of interdependence between the Circuit and bathhouses should not be overlooked. Major holidays and Circuit parties tend to bring brisk business to “the tubs.” Besides acting as venues for sexual encounters, bathhouses also act as centers for socializing, safe havens for men to “come down” off of their intoxicants, and a cheaper alternative to a hotel room so that revelers could clean up and get a few hours of sleep. Of course, “the tubs” is also a prime spot for further display of the body.

The elemental funk of the Paradise Garage (1977-1987)

In contrast (and, in many ways, conjunction) with the Saint, there was its funkier African-Latino counterpart, the Paradise Garage. The Garage was just that, a renovated garage on 84 King St. that became a spiritual haven for those who loved to dance.

Characterized by Cheren as “the ultimate tribal dance space,” the Garage took much of its inspiration from the Loft. Like the Loft, the Paradise Garage was invitation-only (one had to go through an interview). It would open on Friday and Saturday night, and close whenever people went home. And, like the Loft, the Garage was a home away from home. Lockers were provided as well as free food and places where one could take a quick nap. For a refreshing change of

environment, there was a rooftop terrace. The sound system was designed by Levan and Richard Long to enhance the treble and bass with extra features such as “tweeter arrays” and special low-end subwoofers known as “Larry’s horn” (Cheren 280).

Although the Garage could not match the Saint in sheer splendor, it was at least as sophisticated (and arguably better) in sound production, in no small part due to the expertise of its resident DJ, Larry Levan. The Garage and Levan are enshrined in underground music culture as, according to Brewster and Braughton, “the crucial link between disco and the musical forms which evolved from it”:

Here a young DJ, Larry Levan, exemplified his profession’s new possibilities—consolidating the club DJ’s new role as producer, remixer and commercially powerful tastemaker. Levan showed just how much creative control a DJ could exercise, and with one of the most devoted and energetic groups of clubbers ever, used the Garage to preserve and amplify much of disco’s original underground spirit. In doing this he...grew to enjoy such a passionate relationship with the people on his dancefloor that they worshipped him more or less as a god...Today, Larry Levan is regularly hailed as the world’s greatest ever DJ, and his club elevated to mythic status whenever it is mentioned (Silcott 20-21).

Levan’s mixture of old classics with new music, his willingness to play songs that other DJs were afraid to touch, and his tendency to send lyrical messages to the dance floor became known as “disco evangelism” (Cheren 182).

The cult of the DJ was an integral part of the Garage’s design. Cheren describes the Garage DJ booth and its premier occupant:

The Garage had the ultimate booth, with one area reserved for the DJ himself, and another more spacious area with couches and tables where the DJ's entourage would gather. The whole thing was generally tightly guarded by a security man, and for many disco fans the ultimate sign that you had arrived was the day you were invited, or allowed, into the booth. Like any hierarchy, booths had a source of supreme power—the DJ—surrounded by a court and an entourage as serious in its own way as the royal courts of old, with its own etiquette, including rewards for the faithful and punishment the disloyal... And in the middle of it all was the mad king who ruled this strange court: La Diva Levan (Cheren 304-305).

If the Saint was the place for the Gay male community's elite in terms of money and looks, the Garage was the home of its dance-masters, who flocked to witness the innovative DJ techniques of Levan. "There was no attitude here," says Cheren about the Garage's clientele, "no cliques defined by their muscles, no fashion victims, no A-list" (Cheren 198). Mireille Silcott, author of *Rave America*, calls the Paradise Garage "a two-thousand capacity haven from prejudice, a decompression zone, not a place to pose or to have sex in backrooms, but a place to *dance*" (Silcott 20).⁹⁰ DJ Johnny Dynell recalls the reverence people had for the Garage: "It's very Old Testament. And for everyone there, it really was a temple. It was sacred ground" (Brewster and Broughton 272).

⁹⁰ Rave culture and underground dance culture in general has elevated Larry Levan to the status of godhood. One reason for this could be the ambience of the Paradise Garage, which was not a place for sex, neither was it a refuge for the elite and the untouchably beautiful. Its inclusiveness would definitely appeal to those who follow the PLUR (Peace Love Unity Respect) ethic of the Rave community.

It was in the Saint, the Paradise Garage, and other Gay clubs in New York that the culture of the DJ was fine-tuned. They were important sites in the transformation of a night of music into a journey, a rhythmic voyage that took the dancers to uncharted psychic, erotic, and spiritual territories. The rapport that DJs enjoy with their crowds in the Circuit has its genesis in these clubs. As the mythic Ur-spaces of the club experience, the Saint and Garage are remembered as the pace setters, oases for Gay men all over the country.

Late 1970s: The birth of the Circuit party

Born from the pattern set by the original Manhattan/Fire Island Circuit, a second-generation Circuit of parties across the US began in the early 1980s. These “Circuit parties” generated a coast-to-coast nomadic community with its own music, DJs, and social calendar. Circuit parties started when some of the men who had gone to Manhattan and Fire Island brought its dance culture, DJs, and technology to their home cities. This new, more geographically diverse, Circuit is said to have begun in Columbus, Ohio, where an artist/club owner named Corbett Reynolds started the Red Party in 1976.

In terms of Gay men traveling from party to party, it is probable that a hidden circuit of parties was already in place for much of the 20th century. These

events would coincide with already established traditions such as New Orleans Mardi Gras, Kentucky Derby, and celebrations of major holidays and festivals such as Halloween and New Years in large urban centers. We know of annual events that pre-date the Red Party, such as the aforementioned Emma Jones party in Pensacola (1966-1974), and New Orleans Southern Decadence (1971), which continues to this day. Some argue that the second Circuit began with Atlanta's annual Hotlanta River Expo, also started in 1976. Reynolds, however, said that Hotlanta got its inspiration from the Red.

I submit that the Red Party was the first because of its pageantry, the transference of the party from a club to a larger rented space, and the importation of Manhattan club sensibilities (performers, DJs, and technologies for light and sound), "the Red" was a Columbus tradition, much like a Gay homecoming. It began in 1976 in a bar that Reynolds owned called Rudely Elegant. He would throw annual parties (White, Black, Tropical, and Red, a tradition he picked up from time spent in Manhattan).

The Red Party was renowned for the care that Reynolds would put in decoration and entertainment for that night, an aspect that newer parties would adopt as the Circuit spread across the nation.⁹¹ The Red Party was just as much a

⁹¹ Pageantry and décor are marks of the bigger Circuit events, and are one reason for the high price of admission. Production costs for the Black and Blue 2002

venue for aesthetic expression as it was a dance party, and was renowned for the special guests who Reynolds would invite, including the drag actress Divine and, on one memorable occasion, singer-actress Grace Jones riding onstage on a motorcycle. The last Red Party (2001), called “Red Fetish,” featured televangelist Tammy Faye as its guest of honor.

What was most important to Reynolds, however, was inclusion. Anyone who wanted to attend his parties was welcome, and he incorporated his guests into his production. One year, he had guests bring kitchen appliances that they had painted red, which he then installed on the spot as decorations. He was not impressed with “the A list,” those people who, due to connections, physical beauty, or wealth, considered themselves to be the best of the best. He despised the custom of setting up separate lounges for “VIPs” (Very Important People) and called them “V-I-Piss lounges.”

Even after Rudely Elegant closed in the early 1980s, the Red Party continued in rented spaces whose location would be kept secret in its formative years to prevent police from shutting it down. Eventually, it found a home in the Valleydale Ballroom, a large venue on the outskirts of Columbus. The Red’s shift

Main Event entitled “Humanité,” for example, were approximately \$225,000 (*Humanité* 74).

from bar to rented space is now standard practice for most Circuit parties today.⁹² There are few clubs anywhere that can handle the large numbers of participants that show up. Parties that occur before and after the main event are usually held at local clubs.

An alternative site for the start of the larger Circuit is San Francisco. In the late 1970s, the City by the Bay had a Circuit-style club, Trocadero Transfer, which brought Manhattan sensibilities to the west coast, including White, Black, and Red Parties. It had its own nationally-renowned scene distinct from Manhattan, including its own DJs and light technicians.

A third alternative would be Chicago. What would eventually become known as “Circuit music” also developed with the “outsourcing” of Manhattan club culture to another city. In the late 1970s, Manhattan DJ Frankie Knuckles brought New York musical sensibilities to a Chicago club called the Warehouse. Knuckles would rework recorded music, extend the rhythm by basically stretching the groove over a longer period of time without dumbing it down in mindless repetition, and preserving what he calls the “heart” of the song. The remixed result was more suited to pace of the dancer, not the 3 1/2 minute radio

⁹² Reynolds suggested the Red Party could also have been a forerunner of Raves. Ravers in the 1980s would likewise keep their venues secret to prevent police interference. The Red Party was different from the Manhattan-Fire Island Circuit and more like the Rave scene in one important aspect: Reynolds welcomed everyone to attend, regardless of sexual orientation or gender.

format that straight-jacketed so many releases. The innovations that he and others were perfecting would create a new sound known as house music (named after Knuckle's DJ residency, the Warehouse).

As mentioned earlier, house music emerged seamlessly from disco. It could be considered, in fact, less commercialized and more sophisticated disco music when it first came out. "I view house music as disco's revenge," said Knuckles (Brewster and Broughton 292). The birth of the Circuit party coincided with the birth of house culture and the music that pulsed through it. House music quickly became the preferred sound for Circuit parties and the soon-to-be Rave scene as they spread throughout North America, Europe, and Australia. As house music diversified into techno house and a myriad other forms, Circuit DJs picked and chose which forms would be applicable for masses of cracked-out Gay men.

Regardless of where one places the origin of the second Circuit, it gained momentum as Gay men in major cities began to set up festival weekends of their own. The pattern went something like this: a group of close friends, usually men who would visit Fire Island together, would decide to have an event in their city. They would contact their friends across the country that they had met on Fire Island and send them tickets to sell to *their* friends so that money could be raised for a decent sound system, lights, venue, decoration, and entertainment. Parties that started out with maybe 300 participants would grow to 5000+ as word got

out. Initially, these parties were called “Pines” or “Pavilion” parties, named after the Fire Island Pines and a dance venue there called the Pavilion. Those names illustrate the importance of Fire Island as well as Manhattan in generating the second Circuit.⁹³

AIDS almost brought the Gay male dance scene to a standstill. Many clubs, had to close because their membership had been virtually wiped out by the late 1980s. Property on Fire Island became a buyer’s market because so many owners had died. The first Circuit nearly disappeared, and the second one almost died in its childhood.

1988: AIDS and the martyrdom of the Saint

1985 was a bad year for the Saint, the club scene, and Gay people. AIDS was so prevalent amongst the Saint’s patrons that it was labeled “the Saint disease” (Brewster and Broughton 2000, 201). The following quote from *The Gay Metropolis* by Charles Kaiser may give us some idea of the effect that AIDS had upon the New York Gay male community during the eighties:

⁹³ The term “Circuit” as applied to the new crop of party weekends across America is said to have been coined one day in the early 1980s at high tea (one of the social events on Fire Island) by Lou Piper, an influential producer of such events in the eastern US.

Gay men in Manhattan from the generation born after World War II would suffer at least a fifty percent casualty rate from this scourge ... Virtually every Gay man in every large American city would experience the death of at least ten friends during the epidemic; for some, the number of deceased friends and acquaintances has surpassed three hundred. (Kaiser 283)

The catastrophic effects of the epidemic doomed the Saint. Belatedly, the management would police the balcony to prevent further sexual acts that could lead to new infections, but it was too late. Cheren describes the fall of the Saint:

The Saint was so huge that it could comfortably hold several thousand, and for years it was crammed every Saturday night. But by 1988, it was lucky if it drew a few hundred souls, even on a good night. The rest were either dead or mourning or dying, or taking care of someone who was. At one point the club sent out its annual membership renewals and over 700 came back marked: Return to Sender—Occupant deceased. The spirit had completely gone out of the place (Cheren 425).

On April 30, 1988, the Saint had its closing party, a year after its funkier alter ego, the Paradise Garage, shut down and reverted back to an ordinary garage (Cheren 412). It was a marathon event with ten DJs who spun nonstop for 40 hours. The last DJ, Robbie Leslie, finished the party at noon on Monday, May 1. Cheren describes the end:

The final chord, the last beat echoed and faded, and it was all over beneath the cavernous dome. Small groups of young men looked old with grief and loss. Nobody wanted to leave, leaving meant never returning, but slowly we stumbled out into the street onto high noon on an overcast regular Monday workday in New York. People were going about their business rushing around, walking dogs, shopping, hailing cabs (Cheren 428).

1988: Rebirth

But the community rallied. Speaking from the sadness and despair of those times, Corbett Reynolds said, "You still have to dance" (interview, July 23, 2001).⁹⁴ In spite (or perhaps because) of the fear and depression that AIDS had brought to those fledgling Gay communities, people needed a release, a space in which they could commemorate their lost ones and celebrate being alive.

At the end of the 1980s, the tradition of holding dances for Gay activism returned. There was shift, however, from political causes to activism on the medical front to help those unfortunates who were succumbing to the plague. New parties with Circuit sensibilities were being thrown in many major cities as AIDS fundraisers, and their popularity grew. Successful treatment and remission of the dread illness, along with an underground steroid and marijuana network to help those with AIDS wasting syndrome, led to a resurgence of the dance community and a noticeable number of rather muscular (and apparently healthy) men that might or might not be HIV+. What began as events for 200 or so people mushroomed into extravaganzas for as many as 24,000.

⁹⁴ Reynolds was also instrumental in raising awareness of and money for people with AIDS in Columbus.

Many of the main events of these annual weekend festivals could no longer be held in regular dance clubs. Like the Red Party, they would take place in large rented venues rather than clubs requiring year-round upkeep.

Second-generation Circuit parties are now Gay traditions in their own right. Major parties are larger than life, with mesmerizing stage shows, fabulous costumes, and nationally renowned DJs. Nevertheless, higher premium has always been placed on the participants on dance floor than performers on stage or in the DJ booth. Continuing the patterns set by the first generation, DJs do not disturb the dancers by talking over the music. Professional performances are tailored to mix in for the duration of one song and mix out with the next without skipping a beat--no speeches, no encores. The real action is on the dance floor.

As mentioned earlier, most of these parties began with an elite group of well-connected friends who watched with growing apprehension as the “unwashed masses” began participating in droves. Special VIP passes were devised to create a separate space for those *aficionados* who did not want to be constantly surrounded by the less refined. The potential for VIP passes to raise more money, however, led to their acquisition by anyone who could afford them, regardless of their level of sophistication.

The Manhattan-Fire Island Circuit did not die. Many of its events, however, have been incorporated into the second Circuit. Manhattan is the home

of the Pride Pier Dance, the Saint-At-Large Black Party and White Party (a continuation of the Saint's parties of the same names), and the seasonal Alegria parties thrown at various times of the year. Fire Island has its own Circuit events, which are of course held in the summer: Invasion of the Pines, the Pines Party, and the Rites of Summer.

The second Circuit reached its peak at about the year 2000 with events in San Diego (Zoo Party), Long Beach (CA: Shockwave), San Francisco (Folsom St. Fair, Colossus), Palm Springs (White Party), Las Vegas (Viva Las Vegas), Dallas (Purple Party), Austin (Meltdown, Splash), Chicago (Fireball, International Male Leather, Market Days, Pumpkinhead)), Detroit (Motorball), Louisville (Crystal Ball), Columbus (Red Party), Cleveland (Erie Party), New Orleans (Southern Decadence, Halloween), Birmingham (AL: Rites of Spring), Atlanta (Hotlanta), Pensacola (FL: Memorial Day), Orlando (Gay Days), Miami (White Party, Winter Party), Washington, DC (Cherry Party, Colors of the Fall) Philadelphia (Blue Ball), New York, and Provincetown (MA: Summer Camp). Outside of the US, Toronto (Unified), Montreal (Black and Blue, Bal des Boys, Red Party, Wild and Wet), Amsterdam (Black Party, White Party, Orange Party), Cape Town (MCQP), and Sydney (Sleaze Ball) were also in the Circuit.

Like the drag balls of the 1930s, the second Circuit went public. Events have been held in some magnificent spaces, such as the Palm Springs and Miami

convention centers (White Parties), the Old Post Office Building in DC (Cherry Party), The Naval shipyard and Constitution Center in Philadelphia (Blue Ball), The Roseland Ballroom in Manhattan (Black and White Parties), the Queen Mary cruise ship docked in Long Beach, Universal Studios and Disney World theme parks in Orlando (Gay Days), the Olympic Stadium in Montreal (Black and Blue), and massive beach parties in South Beach (Winter Party) and Fire Island (Morning Party).

But trouble was on the way.

1998: death, scandal, and the Morning Party

Like molly houses, drag balls, and disco, public awareness of Circuit parties would lead to public outcry and condemnation. The first sign that the second Circuit was in trouble was when scandal broke out concerning an event called the Morning Party.

The biggest dance extravaganza of the year on Fire Island is the Pines Party, a beach event with the date fixed according to the tide tables. Traditionally held in August, the Pines Party is more than just a Circuit party; it is a community social, with food and other entertainment besides dancing. The Morning Party was once the main event of the Pines Party weekend.

Initially, the Pines Party began as a once-only gig in the 1979 in order to raise money for a fire truck. In 1983, the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) began the Morning Party to raise funds for people with HIV. Like Miami's Winter Party, the Morning Party was held on the beach on a Sunday from 11 am until 5pm, accessorizing the beauty of the Atlantic as the backdrop for the event.

The Morning Party helped the Pines weekend become a full-fledged Circuit party. Problems arose, however, because of the sheer size of the event, which drew 5000+ people. Since there is no hospital and no paved roads on that part of the island, health emergencies must be airlifted by helicopter to Long Island. On August 16, 1998, hours before the Morning Party was to commence, a man died from a GHB overdose. 21 participants were arrested that same day for drug possession. For the Pines, a tiny but internationally notorious community, the situation had become unmanageable and far too visible to the outside world. 1998 was not the first year that drug overdose had been an issue. Accusations that the GMHC was encouraging irresponsible sexual behavior and drug abuse led the GMHC to permanently cancel the Morning Party.

The time of day in which the Morning Party was held made it different from most other Circuit events, and it may be that its nonstop party schedule and location contributed to its downfall. The primacy of the Morning Party as "the" party of the weekend shifted the epicenter of the weekend to the hours of 11 am

until 5 pm Sunday, the period when most people would recuperate from the excesses of Friday and Saturday. When the Morning Party was cancelled, the Pines Party returned the focus to Saturday night-early Sunday morning.

In hindsight, the Morning Party was a disaster waiting to happen. A typical Pines summer weekend involved no fewer than two dance events per day from Friday to Sunday. Because of the ubiquitous house parties (a Fire Island tradition that goes back to the 1930s) and the sexual action in the Meat Rack, participants can go non-stop from Friday through Sunday.

Perhaps partying in the same place for so long is potentially disastrous no matter where it takes place. The distinction between party space and public (read “sober”) space is undermined in the Pines, and especially so in the Meat Rack next door. In the Pines, it is easy to imagine oneself immersed at all times in the world of the carnivalesque. Participants may feel that they never have to fret about the personal accountability that is demanded by convention and by force of law when re-entering public sober space between venues. Large numbers of reveler-visitors with no connection to the local community only reinforce the lack of accountability.

The Winter Party in South Beach is also a beach party on a Sunday afternoon. What makes the Winter Party different from the Morning Party is its location in a much more public space. A hospital is minutes away. Unlike the

Pines, South Beach is not a predominantly Gay male enclave, and it has a visible police force. There is much more of an obvious need to carry oneself with at least a minimum pretense of sobriety. In turn, this keeps the most flagrant violators in line because, for too many Circuit queens, the fear of being arrested is perversely greater than the fear of dying.

By 2000, the problems that haunted the Morning Party were evident everywhere in the Circuit. Success for Circuit parties led to larger numbers and less personal accountability for a significant number of participants. GHB, which has the unfortunate tendency of sending those who do too much into mindless spastic fits or into comas from which they never wake up, was used irresponsibly by too many men. This occurred with ever-increasing frequency, and severely damaged the credibility of Circuit parties as harmless fundraisers. From 1997 to 2003, the Gay male club scene across the nation was inundated with ever-increasing numbers of men being hospitalized for GHB overdose. The scene was getting the wrong kind of national attention.

2001: downsizing

Over the years since the early 1990s, Circuit parties had been growing in size, extravagance, and expense. Since 2001, however, the scene has been down-

sizing. Numbers have been lower at most of the parties. Some events have disappeared altogether.

This is, in part, due to bad publicity. The Circuit world managed to avoid national public scrutiny until 2001 when two articles about excessive drug use and sexual behavior during Circuit parties were published in professional journals.⁹⁵ The reports sparked a series of investigations by health officials, law enforcement personnel, Gay media, and evangelical Christians. On June 20, 2002, the national newspaper *USA Today* had an article about the Circuit and rampant drug abuse (Leinward 11).

Four days later, *The O'Reilly Factor* television show featured a live-cast debate concerning the same issue. The debate was between two Gay men, Richard Elovich (pro-Circuit) and Michelangelo Signorile (anti-Circuit), which degenerated into a shouting match between them. O'Reilly, a conservative pundit who is not known to be a supporter of the Gay community, appeared to be delighted with the fracas.

⁹⁵ Mattison 2001, 119-126, Mansergh 2001, 953-958. The Mansergh et al article indicates that there is substantial drug use and sex during Circuit weekends, The abstract concludes that "Intensive, targeted health promotion efforts are needed" (Mansergh 953). The Mattison et al article states, "Circuit party attendees are well educated and financially secure. Party drug use is high...[party drugs] are associated with various measure of unsafe sex. More comprehensive research on club drug use in Gay men is required" (Mattison 120).

In some ways, however, the shameful public behavior of Elovich and Signorile may have helped the Circuit and the Gay community. The embarrassing spectacle of two Gay men sassing each other as an amused conservative commentator watched them go at it probably led many Straight Americans to laugh at Gay folk and Circuit parties rather than condemn them.

Bad press did not stop there. In August of 2003, *The O'Reilly Factor* featured another debate about Circuit morality, this time focusing on the Orlando Gay Days Circuit party. Martin Mawyer, president of the Christian Action Network, claimed that Disney World was irresponsible when it allowed a Circuit party on its premises. He then showed footage from One Mighty Party (a Gay Days event held in Disney World) to illustrate Gay depravity. Chris Alexander-Manley, co-owner of Gay Days, Inc., pointed out that the footage had been digitally modified so that shirtless men appeared to be completely naked as they danced together. In a case of mutually-contradictory spins, Mawyer portrayed the parties as more decadent than they really were, and Alexander-Manley glossed over the more scandalous aspects of Circuit parties in the Magic Kingdom.

Even before 2001, the federal government has been waging an aggressive campaign to eradicate the Rave scene.⁹⁶ Since the rationale behind this campaign

⁹⁶ After an unsuccessful attempt to pass the RAVE (Reduce America's Vulnerability to Ecstasy) Act in 2002, Congress passed the Illicit Drug Anti-

has been to save the youth of America from drugs, the older, Gayer Circuit community has not been targeted with the same vehemence. It was only a matter of time, however, before the Circuit faced the same pressures as the Rave community, but from other Gay men and Christian homophobic groups as well as law enforcement. As more attention is focused on the Gay community with TV shows, movies, and Gay media darlings, the more the public will be exposed to the glamorous and controversial world of the Circuit. As with molly houses and drag balls, public attention leads to crackdowns.

The concern for drug abuse has been especially damaging to the Circuit. In 2002, the final big event of Gay Days featured a typical pat-down for illegal substances, but with a new feature: police were on hand to arrest anyone caught with drugs. This was a departure from the usual protocol, which was to forbid the offender from entering the party and confiscation of illegal substances.

In addition to GHB overdose, a new culture of crystal methamphetamine usage further undermined the Circuit. The popularity of crystal meth as a sexual enhancer as well as a stimulant changed the sexual dynamics of the Gay male community. Instead of going to the bars or Circuit parties to “hook up,” men would go online to internet men-for-men sites, make their selections, and by-pass the bar/Circuit scene completely. But even though fewer men were attending the

Proliferation Act in 2003 by quietly placing it within the Amber Alert Act for missing children.

Circuit because of sex, drugs, and the internet, the Circuit was nevertheless blamed for encouraging men to become addicted to crystal.

Drug scandals are not the only things that have hurt the Circuit; commodification of the Circuit has disillusioned many of its original founders.

No longer are major events just fabulous parties put together by a few friends. Many of the people who originally threw these parties are tired of the hassles, time, and financial risk that they face when they put them on. The infighting that occurs among members of Circuit organizations can be relentless and devastating. There has been more than one instance of illegal profiteering by unscrupulous people within the organizations. Participants are known to make their share of shade; I know of two incidences when counterfeit tickets were produced by morally-challenged attendees. There has been a tendency for parties to die, become corporate, or submit themselves to nonprofit organizations as means to raise money for GLBT-related charities.

Since 2002, many Circuit parties have ceased to exist. The Columbus Red Party and its successor, the Chrome Party, are done. Atlanta Hotlanta, Chicago Fireball and Pumpkinhead, DC Colors of the Fall, Cleveland Erie Party, Detroit Motorball, San Francisco Hell Ball, Austin Splash and Perfect Day, and Louisville Crystal Ball are all gone.

Fewer dance clubs outside of LA, San Francisco, NYC, Fire Island, Chicago, and Miami are hiring Circuit DJs on non-Circuit weekends. I have been told that this is due in part to concerns with Circuit music as an inspiration for irresponsible drug use, especially with the rise in crystal meth addiction among Gay men. There also seems to be a significant decrease in the numbers of Gay men who want to dance the night away.

Other parties have modified their status to keep themselves afloat. GLBT groups involved with community awareness and political activism are sponsoring Circuit events as fundraisers. After the Miami Winter Party went bankrupt in 2004, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF)⁹⁷ took it over. The NGLTF also sponsors a beach party on Fire Island called Ascension. The Philadelphia Blue Ball merged with the Equality Forum.⁹⁸ And although there are currently no Circuit parties in their traditional birthplace of Columbus, Ohio, the annual Qualia Folklife Festival follows Circuit sensibilities and throws fundraiser dances with Circuit DJs during its festival weekend. This modest event is all that currently survives in the city that supposedly started it all.

⁹⁷ The NGLTF was founded in 1972 as a national GLBT civil rights organization.

⁹⁸ Centered in Philadelphia, the Equality Forum's mission is to advance national and international GLBT civil rights.

Perhaps the biggest problem faced by the Circuit is the troubled economy of early 21st century America and the resurgence of politically-motivated homophobia. We must also take into account the rise in martial patriotism after the attack on Manhattan on September 11, 2001. The country has readily gone to war in Afghanistan and Iraq. This in turn fed a growing homophobic movement led by war-tolerant Christian extremists such as Focus on the Family. These groups would love nothing more than to have homosexuality re-criminalized by the law and re-pathologized by psychiatry so that society falls in line with their own theology of damning Gays to eternal hellfire.⁹⁹

One unexpected ally in the preservation of the circuit is the police force in cities that host the parties. Since the police must deal with the violence of some Straight crowds at certain concerts and sporting events, the refreshingly well-behaved Gay Circuit parties have inspired law enforcement officers for years to overlook all but the most blatant displays of drug use. The presence of openly Gay police officers allows for better communication between Circuit promoters and officers to determine what problems in the Circuit truly deserve investigation. Officers may continue to be tolerant and perhaps even supportive of the Circuit, which often hires them off-duty to act as security at events. Unlike the federal

⁹⁹ The current unpopularity of the war and mounting resistance to Fundamentalist politics are beginning to turn the tide of public opinion.

government, local law enforcement personnel have everything to gain by coordinating their efforts with, not against, the Circuit.¹⁰⁰

Circuiteer-journalist Scotty Van Tussenbrook described the following conversation he had with police at a Circuit party:

While attending the White Party in Palm Springs, I found myself standing next to a couple of off-duty cops who were hired as security. I asked them what they were thinking. The woman officer replied, “Oh, this is our favorite party of the year!” and the (presumably) Straight male officer with her nodded. The man said that at most Straight parties and sporting events they have to prepare for lots of “incidents”—fights, drunkenness, drama. “But we never get any of that at the White Party,” the woman added. “You guys just show up, take off your shirts, look pretty, and dance. It's fun!” (Weems, “The Circuit” 205)

In many places, law enforcement officers tend to keep away from Gay functions. This may be due to homophobia and the Gay bubble. But more important is that many law enforcement officers recognize that there is a lack of disruptive violence at Gay male establishments, thus lessening the need for a strong police presence.

¹⁰⁰ There is an overwhelming silence and erasure in government discourse concerning the social benefits of a drug culture that reduces violent public behavior by men. Perhaps the government fears the consequences of such a culture on the young, especially those who are expected to continue American military campaigns. Homosexuals are still not admitted openly into the military or in many male contact sports because they are not considered real men due, in part, to their distaste for violence. Rave masculinity undermines this in that Straight men can be nonviolent like homosexuals. Circuit masculinity undermines it in that homosexuals can be considered as masculine as Straight men.

In *The Soul Beneath the Skin*, David Nimmons gives statistics from different cities that verify the remarkable lack of violence in the Gay community, including the bar scene (13-39). Nimmons also quotes police officers:

“You want proof? Just ask any New York cop,” says NYPD Sergeant Rodriguez. “They traditionally say Gay Pride is one of the most enjoyable events they attend. Cops will tell you they love doing it. Some cops will do anything not to work certain parades in the city but they are happy to work Gay Pride. Sometimes you get an initial homophobic response, sure. But once they’ve done it, they realize it’s a safe day” (Nimmons 21).

Many police departments have no desire to cause problems for the promoters of such peaceful events and establishments, especially since many off-duty cops get hired by them as security and they are easier to manage compared to more violent Straight events and nightclubs.¹⁰¹

Bucking the trend for Circuit parties to downsize or even disappear, we have parties such as Alegria in NYC-Rio and the Salvation parties originating in London that are popping up across Europe. Like traditional Circuit parties, these events are not dependent on a single physical location. They tend to be heavily dependent on the vision and direction of one charismatic person, such as Ric Sena of Alegria, Jeffrey Sanker of the well-established White Party-Palm Springs, or

¹⁰¹ Politics, however, can change enforcement policies. For the last few years, there have been attempts in some major cities, particularly New York, to “crack down” on Gay dance venues. Sound levels have been part of the rationale for some closings.

Johnny Chisholm of the Gulf Coast. As with the demise of the Columbus Red Party with the death of its founder, Corbett Reynolds, these events may last only as long as their founders choose to run them.

Other parties have managed to continue with a changing of the guard or a change in image. Toronto Unified underwent a change in management and became Prism. Market Days in Chicago no longer advertises itself as a Circuit party while still holding Circuit-like events.

There are signs of alternative Circuits that step outside of the narrow racial and body-sculpted aesthetic of the second Circuit. Seattle has a party called Northern Exposure, which avoids any references to the standard Circuit icon: a chiseled male torso. There is also the Circuit-esque Lazy Bear Weekend in Guerneville, California. Northern Exposure and Lazy Bear are what might be called Bear Circuit parties, well within the tradition of Leather-based Circuit events, but with absolutely no inclination to fit in within the mainstream Circuit's body fascist ideal. There is a recently-formed circuit for Black men, dance parties that are thrown in conjunction with Black Gay Pride celebrations in cities such as DC, Atlanta, Chicago, and Toronto. At this point, I do not know if this African American/Canadian circuit will become the newest incarnation of the Circuit because I have yet to determine if there is the same premium placed on DJ culture.

Internationally, the Circuit is growing. There are Circuit parties on every continent except for Antarctica. Cape Town in South Africa has the MCQP (Mother City Queer Projects) Party. Hong Kong has its White Party weekend and Taipei has Winter White, both during Christmas. Thailand has a Circuit party called Nation on the resort island of Phuket. Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia hosts the Princefest, perhaps the first Gay event of its kind in a predominantly Muslim country.

The Circuit is also on the high seas. Atlantis Cruises offers what has been called week-long Circuit parties on board their ships, complete with renowned DJs and theme parties. Hawaii, the Caribbean, and the Mediterranean are accessorized as fabulous backdrops to enhance the cruise-liner-as-Circuit-party-venue.

The transient geography of names

The Circuit scene tends to be geographically fluid. Events come and go, and the venues that host them are built and then demolished. But some names continue and sometimes even multiply.

Black Parties and White Parties were thrown in the Saint, the Trocadero Transfer in San Francisco, and in Columbus, Ohio during the 1970s, an indication

that the Manhattan-Fire Island loop was already expanding nationally well before the AIDS crisis. These monochrome parties can still be found in many major cities today. The most successful of them are the White Parties of Palm Springs and South Beach and the NYC Black Party. The tradition of naming a party after other colors than black and white lives on with the Red Party in Montreal and Blue Ball in Philadelphia.

In the Manhattan-Fire Island loop, there has been a transference of club names as well. The Monster, Ice Palace, and Pavilion were the names of clubs in Fire Island and Manhattan. At this time, only the Ice Palace and the Pavilion on Fire Island survive. From Manhattan to the rest of the country, we also see the names travel, even to clubs in Columbus, Ohio, where the Paradise Garage became the Garage and 12 West became 87 West. The tradition continues today, with the Chicago Crobar replicating itself in South Beach and NYC, and the legendary once-a-month Alegria parties in Manhattan occasionally thrown in South Beach and Rio de Janeiro. Salvation, originally in Manhattan and reborn in South Beach only to fall again, has been reborn once more in London, England. It moves still: there are Salvation parties in the Netherlands, with an eye for expansion across Western Europe.

Circuit nouveau

We are currently seeing the rise of what may be the third Circuit, a movement that has roots going back to the first days of the Columbus Red Party some 30 years ago. Corbett Reynolds always had an open mind so far as who he wanted at his parties. Gay men ran the show, but everyone was welcome.

The movement to actively encourage Straight people to attend Circuit events started in Montreal with the merging of Circuit and house cultures in parties thrown by a Gay organization called the Bad Boys Club of Montreal (BBCM). The nascent third Circuit has its own yearly calendar of festivals in Montreal, the biggest being Black and Blue held in early October. Black and Blue is one of the largest and most elaborate Circuit parties in the second Circuit as well, but differs from Circuit parties in other cities because so many Straight people are participants (about 50% of the crowd).

Still in the shadow of the second Circuit, the third Circuit is slowly making itself known outside of Quebec. In an article entitled “Reinventing the Circuit,” Steve Kammon describes it as “the next level”:

The most obvious way to grow these events is nothing new—Black and Blue in Montreal and Sydney Mardi Gras have been doing it for years. But it’s never been done in America. We have never invited straight people to the parties of the Circuit. If our signature events could evolve into mixed events that offer a new kind of energy and which are bigger in scale and

even better production standards, it would reinvigorate the scene (Kammon 24).

This new movement is a reflection of the wholesale acceptance of the Gay community in popular culture during the early 1990s and the creation of “mixed” Straight/Gay dance clubs with Circuit sensibilities in Montreal. With the existence of Circuit-like clubs and events in Toronto and Miami that cater to both Straight and Gay crowds, we may be seeing the beginning of a true inter-city Montreal-Toronto-Miami movement of revelers, DJs, and Gay sensibilities that mark a new phase in Circuit culture. In this new Circuit, there tends to be a greater range of musical selection than at the typical Circuit event; there is something for just about everyone within the traditional 125-135 BPM range. This development may be seen as a return to the everybody-welcome ethos that Corbett Reynolds insisted for his Red Party.

In order to survive, most Circuit parties will have to be more than just refuges for cracked-out Circuit queens. Those that are not fundraisers will be more vulnerable to negative portrayals and crackdowns. Parties that are situated in community-based festivals will also stand a better chance. Many people feel that the age of the mega-party with 15,000 to 20,000 participants has seen its heyday.

Smaller, more intimate parties may be the wave of the future, with an even more open and inviting attitude toward Straight Circuiteers.

The metrosexual

The rebirth of the Circuit coincides with the rise of the metrosexual, a Straight man with Circuit sensibilities. It would not be wrong to say that the metrosexual is, in fact, a child of the Circuit.

With the advent of Gay-based comedy shows, "reality TV," Gay cable channel, and sympathetic presentation of Gay issues in the mainstream press, Americans are becoming more familiar with the Gay community, and some Straight men are choosing to abandon their heteronormative heritage and adopt Gay sensibilities. There is talk about the "new" urban man, dubbed by British writer Mark Simpson as "the metrosexual," who dresses with care and affects a "Gay" look regardless of his sexual proclivity: "Metrosexual man might prefer women, he might prefer men, but when it's all said and done nothing comes between him and his reflection" (Simpson, *Queer World* 209).¹⁰²

¹⁰² Simpson portrays the metrosexual as a commodity fetishist, not a dancer. I feel, however, that the existence of the Circuit in almost every major city for the last 15 years has made its mark on popular culture and the metrosexual image.

In *The Metrosexual Guide to Style*, Michael Flocker sees the metrosexual as Straight, but with a Gay male nonsexual orientation:

The new breed of man is one of style, sophistication and self-awareness. He is just as strong as his predecessor, but far more diverse in his interests, his tastes and most importantly his self-perception. Secure in his masculinity, he no longer has to spend his life defending it...the walls separating straight men from their gay, fashion-forward brothers are beginning to crumble (Flocker xiii).

The "newness" of copying Gay men's sensibilities in dress, manner, and physique for Straight male consumers is highly questionable, however. We need only look at the Baroque Age in terms of its aesthetic sensibilities. But that would be a bit of a reach on my part because Gay influences were closeted and difficult to certify with any scholarly certainty. More recently (and with more direct proof), Susan Bordo traces its origins back to 1974 when Calvin Klein visited the Flamingo, one of the original Manhattan/Fire Island Circuit clubs:

Sex, as Calvin Klein knew, sells. He also knew that Gay sex wouldn't sell to straight men. But the rock-hard athletic gay male bodies that Klein admired in the Flamingo did not advertise their sexual preference through the feminine codes--limp wrists, raised pinky finger, swishy walk--which the straight world then identified with homosexuality. Rather, they embodied a highly masculine aesthetic that, although definitely exciting for gay men, would scream "heterosexual" to (clueless) straights. (Bordo 1999, 401)

The biggest change since Klein's "discovery" and commodification of early Circuit sensibilities into designer jeans is that people now realize that a

rock-hard masculine body is no longer the sole domain of Straight men. It is becoming commonplace for people to assume that a man who looks *too* good *must* be Gay. With this realization in mind, the typical Gay-mimicking metrosexual would not wish to appear out of shape any more than appear underdressed.

Circuit masculinity, with its privileging of muscle and macho, was born in the club tradition witnessed by Klein in 1974 and is becoming as commercially exploitable for stylish Straights as it is currently for Gay male consumers. I would imagine that more than a few metrosexuals have gone to Circuit parties or, if not quite ready to go that far, have gone to Gay clubs such as those in Miami, Toronto, and Montreal that feature Circuit DJs and sensibilities. In fact, I have met plenty of them that do both. The Circuit and the metrosexual "movement" are blurring Gay and Straight boundaries, but with a notable difference. Their novelty lies not so much in the blending of sensibilities but in the reduction of stigma attached to trendy urban homosexuality and the affirmation of the masculine Gay man. As barriers between Straight men and Gay men fall, interaction between the two will become less difficult and both will feel free to experiment with their sexual and social identities.

Because the Circuit is so unabashedly masculine, and because young Straight men increasingly question the violence-tinged standards of

heteronormative masculinity that insists fighting in bars and fighting for their country certifies them as real men, I expect to see more Straight metrosexual men at Circuit parties. Like Gay men (and more than a few Straight women), they, too, can enjoy ecstatic male-bonding camaraderie without having to worry about violence.¹⁰³

Like a Fine Wine

We can expect a better-educated, more mature, and much more diverse Circuit community in the future. As mentioned earlier, one of the things that hurt the Circuit was the death of almost the entire first generation because of the AIDS epidemic. There is now an older generation in sufficient numbers to serve as examples to the younger ones. The eroticized masculinity of the Circuit already privileges muscle daddies as legitimate objects of desire. This older generation is learning to stay physically fit (and sexually attractive) well into its 40s and beyond, a phenomenon that impresses upon the younger generation that the party does not have to end if one takes proper care of oneself and one's friends.

¹⁰³ I also recommend that the Circuit community refrain from calling our Straight girlfriends the unflattering name of “fag hags.” Since so many of these women think, act, and dress with Gay sensibilities, it would not be inappropriate to call them “metrosexuals” as well as Straight men.

CHAPTER 6

POPULAR DANCE

If I can't dance, it's not my revolution.

Attributed to Emma Goldman¹⁰⁴

Dance and GLBT history go together. From the molly house to drag balls to the rent party, same-sex dancing inspired persecution by the state but also promoted solidarity among those within the outlaw community for hundreds of years. During Stonewall and its aftermath, dance accompanied, sustained, and accelerated liberation. The AIDS epidemic dampened the fervor for dance but did not extinguish it, as people danced to remember the dead, celebrate the living, and raised money for the sick.

¹⁰⁴ This popular saying attributed to Goldman is probably distilled from the following quote in her autobiography, *Living My Life*: "At the dances I was one of the most untiring and gayest. One evening a cousin of Sasha, a young boy, took me aside. With a grave face, as if he were about to announce the death of a dear comrade, he whispered to me that it did not behoove an agitator to dance. Certainly not with such reckless abandon, anyway...I grew furious at the impudent interference of the boy. I told him to mind his own business...I did not believe that a Cause which stood for a beautiful ideal, for anarchism, for release and freedom from convention and prejudice, should demand the denial of life and joy...If it meant that, I did not want it" (56).

The previous chapters dealt with the history of the Gay men's dance movement and the Circuit in terms of its place in GLBT history. It is equally important that the Circuit be placed within a general history of dance in America. Masculine nonviolence and spiritual transcendence are not simply mental constructs or moral principles; they are performed and experienced through bodies that interact with each other in bars, on the street, in bedrooms, and on the dance floor. The dances that Gay men do, the music that they dance to, and the social relationships that frame the dance all have intertwined histories with popular dance in general that cannot be cleanly separated each other.

This chapter is a history of bodies moving to music and the revolutionary impact that dance fads have on global culture. When we look at the evolution of popular dance from pre-Colonial America to the Gay men's Circuit, we can trace a movement from scripted, regulated performance to unscripted, fluid individual expression. This movement reflects tensions between acceptable/outlaw entertainment, informal/staged performance, African/European sensibilities, and Gay/Straight festive culture.

Dance in colonial America: officially European, increasingly African

Most of the earliest popular dances recorded and preserved from colonial American culture¹⁰⁵ have two major cultural sources: African and European. Social dances from Europe were influenced (and would eventually be replaced) by African American dance trends, which incorporated both African and European sensibilities.

For Europeans, social dance was usually relegated to festivals. It was not, however, incorporated into religious ritual. Dance was seen as a leisure activity, expressive, fun, nonproductive, basically frivolous, and suspiciously sinful, especially as the stern ethics of the Protestant Reformation concerning the body and physical pleasure as sources of sin took hold in some populations. Where dancing was officially sanctioned, there were distinctions made between the dances of the upper classes and those of the lower classes. But each influenced the other.

Initially, European-based formal dances in colonial America required equal numbers of men and women as complementary teams that would interact,

¹⁰⁵ This short history of dance has no pretensions of being anywhere near complete. The dances I mention reflect only those forms that have survived in the historical record, most likely because the dances themselves became part of traditional American folklore. I am keenly aware that they represent only a fraction of the dances that were done over the last 200 years.

pair up, and exchange partners in reels, cotillions, minuets, quadrilles, and square dances. Among the older, less formal dances, jigs and clogging could be danced alone or in pairs.

African American cultural sensibilities tend to link dance to the highest possible spiritual experience a human being could have. In classical African religious traditions, the Gods dance through us. When African Americans were forced to abandon their beloved deities and adopt Christianity, they still held on to the means by which they accessed the divine through rhythmic movement, percussion, and song. Just as we can trace many forms of popular American music to African American gospel roots, so can we trace the inspiration for the myriad dance styles developed in the last hundred or so years to a deeply felt connection between body, spirit, and rhythm that comes from Africa.¹⁰⁶

In *Steppin' on the Blues*, Jacqui Malone gives the following description of Black dance:

African American dance serves some of the same purposes as traditional dances in western and central African cultures: on both continents black dance is a source of energy, joy, and inspiration; a spiritual antidote to

¹⁰⁶ People with refined rhythmic sensibilities, regardless of race or ethnic background, tend to raise children with those same sensibilities. I do not believe that genetics plays a significant role in determining if somebody “has rhythm.” It is possible that the somatic education of rhythm is passed on to the child by the movements of its mother and other caretakers as they hold it, sing to it, and play with it. This education begins at birth or perhaps even earlier, while the child is still in the womb. I see it as a culture-based pedagogy that is more prevalent in some groups than in others.

oppression; and a way to lighten work, teach social values, and strengthen institutions. It also teaches the unity of mind and body and regenerates mental and physical power. The role of dance as a regenerative force is echoed in the words of Bessie Jones of the Georgia Sea Islands: “We’d sing different songs, and then we’d dance a while to rest ourselves.”

Unfortunately, we can only speak in general terms about the African roots of American dance because there is so little information about exactly how it was done. Malone concedes that little can be said with certainty about what African American dance was like before the twentieth century:

Much has been written about the role of music and folklore among black people in the United States, but the meaning and the pervasiveness of dance have been sorely neglected despite the fact that dance touches almost every aspect of African American life...Although visual source materials are not available to trace with accuracy the evolution of African American dances in the United States during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, certain movement patterns, gestures, attitudes, and stylizations present in the body language of contemporary black Americans are assertive proof of African influences. [Olly Wilson says that] African Americans “refine all movement in the direction of dance-beat elegance. Their work movements become dance movements and so do their play movements; and so, indeed, do all the movements they use every day, including the way they walk, stand, turn, wave, shake hands, reach, or make any gesture at all” (Malone 24).

The pervasive devaluing of African cultural influences for the entirety of American history has kept scholars from giving African American dance its due as an important feature of American history. But it must also be said that the casual genius of movement preserved and regenerated within the African American community is difficult for scholars to express in words.

I submit that the use of dance to invoke spiritual experiences allows African-influenced styles in America to incorporate personal innovation within prescribed forms. When the Spirit says “Throw your hands in the air!” the resulting innovation is not deviance from the communal norm but affirmation of divine inspiration. The fondness for personal innovation may also be due to the historical context of colonial times. Africans in America found themselves thrown into a collective of many different cultures from Mali to Angola (and perhaps a few from Mozambique and Zanzibar). Imagine the vast range of Gods, rhythms, and expressions of movement that would arise when people danced together. Condemnation of their sacred religions by their oppressors would have disrupted the routine education of the young in all areas of ritual, including dance. Within a few generations, innovations would logically appear with greater frequency because there would no longer be strong institutions of classical African culture to certify what was proper.

Africans were exposed to the less sophisticated dances of European colonists and often forced to give up their own dances, It was inevitable that, given their cultural heritage, the servants would quickly outshine the masters.

Malone quotes Ralph Ellison:

The slaves first sensed it. They sensed it when they looked at the people in the big house dancing their American versions of European social dances. And they first mocked them—and then they decided, coming from dancing cultures, that they could do them better. And then they went on to

define what surely is the beginnings of an American choreography...They had the freedom of experimentation, of trying things out...And in the doing, they found ways of making the human body move in stylized ways which were different (Malone 38).

The Africanization of social dance and music occurred all over the New World where African immigrants settled. Nevertheless, the social hierarchy that kept most Africans and their descendants in slavery would *officially* devalue their culture and religion. Although Whites would admire and imitate the dances of Blacks and Native Americans, popular dance among Whites in colonial America would be ostensibly based on trends coming from Europe. Dance was culture, and *real* culture was seen as the exclusive domain of European-based institutions.

Because of this bias, we know much more about European dances in America before the 20th century than African ones. But characteristics of African dance have emerged to become the most influential in terms of today's popular dance. Kai Fikentscher says the African sensibilities won out, and that "around 1910. The European imprint on American social dance seems to have diminished for good" (Fikentscher 24). African-based dances were often danced without a partner, and, as mentioned earlier, a higher premium was placed on personal innovation rather than prescribed movement. A few African American dances from early American history have survived in the record, and we see traits in them

that can be found in popular dance today, most notably individual expression. The ring shout had spiritual connotations; it featured innovative dancing while moving in a circle with other celebrants.¹⁰⁷ The cakewalk, a secular dance, was likewise innovative, but originated with the satirical humor of the oppressed mocking the oppressor:

As a product of black folk culture, the cakewalk remains obscure in origin. Perhaps with African roots, it developed on plantations sometime before the Civil War, as slaves imitated the Grand March that concluded the cotillions and fancy balls given by whites. Although plantation owners often mistook the dance for childlike play, the cakewalk in fact had a satirical purpose. Promenading in pairs, dancers crossed their arms, arched their backs, threw back their heads, and strutted with exaggerated kicks (Gates and Appiah 121).¹⁰⁸

As with the cakewalk, European Americans and African Americans did their own dances, but nevertheless imitated each other as well. It is important to note that the dance styles most likely mixed with Native American dance forms as well.¹⁰⁹ Not surprisingly, one European style that blended well with African

¹⁰⁷ Dancing in moving circles is also a trait of many Native American dances. We may find that the ring dance has Native American roots as well as African.

¹⁰⁸ Unlike any other form of African American dance from colonial times, there is plenty of material on the cakewalk because it was preserved in minstrel shows and became an international dance craze in the late 1800s.

¹⁰⁹ Some serious scholarly research is needed to outline the contributions made to American communal dance from not only African but also American Indian cultures.

sensibilities was the jig. In colonial Williamsburg, the “Negro jig” apparently was a favorite at one time (Southern 44).

I suspect that the influx of dancing masters from France at this time to train the White folk in the rigid requirements of the minuet, the grand march, and other courtly dances may have been a reaction to the Africanization of dance. It was probably an attempt to segregate festive cultures as well as people. In the long run, however, these attempts at European sophistication provided more material for African Americans to lampoon and incorporate into their own dances, which in turn were incorporated into mainstream dances by the rest of the population.

There was also a countermovement to have dancing banned. For a significant number of White Christians, dancing was evil, or at least highly suspect. All of the aforementioned dances in this chapter, European- and African-based, were condemned at some point by Christian religious authorities, Catholic as well as Protestant.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ A notable Christian exception would be the Shakers, who incorporated sacred dance into their worship services.

The marriage of music and dance

Until the early twentieth century, dance styles were wedded to specific types of music, and they often shared the same name. Note that “reel,” “quadrille,” “waltz,” “polka,” and “jig” refer to a type of dance and the music appropriate for that dance. People would reel to reels, dance a waltz when a waltz was played, polka to polka songs, and do the jig when they heard a jig. One reason for this was the rich variety of tempos and rhythm patterns available in the social dances of those times. Quadrilles, for example, could be in 2/4 and 6/8 time, while waltzes are in 3/4 time.

2/4, 4/4, 3/4, and 6/8 are *time signatures* that determine the pulse of a song. By “pulse” I mean the way in which certain beats in a song’s rhythm feel stronger than others. In turn, the pulse of a song influences how people dance to it. Because they are more than a little subjective, time signatures are not easy to explain, so I will do so from the standpoint of the dancer rather than the musician.¹¹¹

¹¹¹ In musical terms, the 4 in 2/4 refers to what kind of note is used in a measure, which in this case would be quarter notes. The 2 refers to how many notes would be in a measure. In 6/8 time, the 8 means that eighth notes would make up the measure, with six notes per measure.

Only the first number in the time signature is important to the dancer. A song done in 2/4 is used for marching because the pulse hits every 2 beats. A march consists of two steps. The pulse is stronger on the first step rather than the second, as in “**one**, two, **one**, two,” etc. In the military, this translates into stepping forward, left foot first: “**left**, right, **left**, right.” The number 3 in 3/4 time is also the number of steps for a waltz: “**one**, two, three, **one**, two, three.” A signature beginning with 4 would stress the first of four beats: “**one**, two, three, four, **one**, two, three, four.”¹¹²

One of the biggest changes in European popular dance occurred in the 19th century when people chose vigorous couple-dancing over the stylized couple-dancing of the minuet and highly choreographed team-dancing. A corresponding relaxation in dress (no more wigs for men, less complex hairstyles and a degree of freedom from corsets for women) came with the new freedom of movement that couples could enjoy (Casey 14-15).

The waltz revolutionized dance in the mid-1840s by separating couples from the group and giving them permission to move with more energy. It also allowed men and women face each other and maintain physical contact for the

¹¹² There is a further discussion of pulse in the chapter of the same name.

duration of the dance.¹¹³ The group no longer moved as one unit, but rather as many couples-units whose interaction was minimized to staying out of each other's way. Initially, the waltz was considered scandalous (Van Der Merwe 237-238), but popular acceptance soon normalized that kind of contact. Team dancing would fall out of fashion.

The popularity of the waltz signaled a change in attitude toward courtship and flirting. Within the public sphere of communal dance, an unprecedented degree of privacy and intimacy was allowed between men and women as they danced as couples. These changes reflected (and promoted) an understanding of romance based on the love of individuals for each other, not family interests or community restrictions placed on women on whom they should marry (a woman could refuse a man's offer to dance). Nevertheless, it was expected that the man approach the woman for a dance, not the other way around. Though not so rigorously followed today, this custom is still part of heteronormative dance protocol.

¹¹³ Face-to-face dancing did not originate with the waltz; it can be found in the cotillion, for example, but only for a limited portion of the dance.

Music and dance get a divorce (but in name only)

The next big change after the waltz was the rise of ragtime music in the late 19th and early 20th century. Only a few years after Emancipation, African Americans freed themselves from the limitations of imported European dance fads and began generating trend-setting moves of their own that would become all the rage in Europe as well as the US. Ragtime, a highly-syncopated musical style that helped streamline popular dance music to the 4/4 count, marked the first big shift to African sensibilities in American culture. Pioneered by the African American community, “ragtime” was the name of the musical style, but the dances that accompanied ragtime had many names and forms, including old ones like the cakewalk and the polka, and new ones, such as the two-step, foxtrot, slow drag (Berlin 14-15).

I suspect that the multitude of dances that developed around ragtime music and the genres that would follow it came about because of three factors: 1) improved communications and travel, 2) the popularity of minstrel shows, vaudeville, cakewalks¹¹⁴ and other Black-inspired performances (with or without actual Black people), and 3) the ease by which different forms of movement

¹¹⁴ In Chapter 5 of *Steppin’ on the Blues*, Malone surveys the smashing success of African American performers and their imitators from 1890 to 1940 (70-90).

coming out of the African American community could be adapted to the 4/4 count.

With ragtime, we see the beginning of global movements in music and dance. The basic simplicity of 4/4 upon which complex musical arrangements could be placed and diverse dance moves could be performed would eventually lead to the highly individualized dance forms found in popular communal dance today. Even with ragtime, there was a premium placed on individual style that allowed for a range of kinesthetic expression harkening back to the ring shout and Africanized jig.

Most ragtime songs are done in 2/4 and 4/4. The resounding popularity of ragtime paved the way so that 4/4 would eventually become the universal time signature for dance music. 3/4 and 6/8 dance music would no longer be trendy from that point on. The dominance of 4/4 is such that it is called “common time.”

Popular dancing in the ragtime era would require male-female couples, reflecting (and supporting) a quiet social revolution that began with dances like the waltz, which championed the primacy of romance and personal desires over community and family in the choosing of a partner, permanent or otherwise. When ragtime became the rage, dancing in teams of men and women was already antiquated for most non-rural communities. GLBT folk would follow the

“couple” format with one modification: they would introduce same-sex couples to underground dance culture.

Swing jazz¹¹⁵ came into scandalous fashion in the 1920s. “Swing” refers both to the music and the dances, although the name does little justice to the splendid variety of dance steps that came out of the swing era, such as the shag,¹¹⁶ jive, Charleston, tap,¹¹⁷ and the still-popular Lindy hop. One general term for swing dances is “jitterbug,” which also refers to an alcoholic in an agitated state (*American Heritage Dictionary* 730). This suggests a cognitive association made between swing and intoxication, an association further enforced by its outlaw jazz roots and the connections made between jazz, liquor, cocaine, heroine, and marijuana (Goldberg 58).

¹¹⁵ “Jazz” has common linguistic roots with “jiz,” slang for sperm (Jarrett 81).

¹¹⁶ Like most swing dances, the shag originated in the African American community. It was considered at one time to be risqué for its close body contact and suggestive moves, and was called the “dirty shag.” It survives today, ironically, as the folk dance of well-to-do White people in the Low Country of coastal North and South Carolina. In 1984, the South Carolina legislature passed a law designating the shag as the state dance (Gray et al 282).

¹¹⁷ Tap is considered to be a hybrid of African dancing sensibilities with the Irish jig. During the 19th century, African and Irish Americans often lived together in poor neighborhoods, and tap dancing is thought to be a result of that closeness (Neal and Forman 33). Notice that tap is usually danced solo, like a jig.

Swing music set the indelible 4/4 stamp on popular dance music that still reigns supreme today. Popular dances were done with little formal interaction with other couples on the dance floor.

Latin-Caribbean dances came into the US club scene in the 1930s. They really made their mark on the national consciousness in the 1950s with the popularity of conga lines, merengue, cha-cha, mambo, and rumba. It is not unreasonable to assume that these dances brought with them a more relaxed attitude toward race in general (and Hispanics in particular) than swing and ragtime. Perhaps it was the popular perception of Latin as “brown” (i.e. between Black and White) that permitted a greater degree of tolerance for interracial interaction.

Most people are not aware of the fact that forced migrations of African populations to the Americas and African religions also play a significant role in the development of Latin-Caribbean as well as African American dance. The conga drum is both a secular and a sacred instrument. “Mambo” is a title for a Vodoun priestess as well as a secular dance.¹¹⁸ The major sites for the creation of

¹¹⁸ In the popular 1960s television comedy, *I Love Lucy*, Cuban American actor and singer Desi Arnaz would sing out the sacred name of “Babalú, Bablúaye!” with his Cuban band, invoking the Lukumi-Santeria God of disease and healing. Of course, only those people familiar with African traditions knew to whom Arnaz was singing.

these dance forms, Cuba, Haiti, Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico, also have communities that practice African religions.¹¹⁹

The rock and R&B (rhythm and blues) revolution individualized popular dance. Although most communal dance at this time was still done as opposite-sex couples, a new dance called “the twist” burst forth on the national scene out of the African American community. Brewster and Broughton describe the importance of this dance, and how it changed America:

The twist caused a revolution because of its simplicity. It required no partner, no routine, no ritual, no training. All it needed was the right record and a loose set of limbs. It was an invocation to get on the floor and do your own thing. Because it wasn’t a couple’s dance, it struck a small blow for sexual equality—destroying the concept of “wallflower,” a girl awaiting an invitation to dance (coincidentally, the Pill [birth control] and the twist were launched within months of each other). Most importantly, perhaps, it unified a group of dancers. Dance the twist and you were no longer just focused on your partner, you were partying with the whole room (Brewster and Broughton 54).

The enthusiastic movements required for many of the new dances that followed the twist (such as the Watusi, the jerk, and the pony) eliminated constant physical contact with one’s dance partner. Slow dancing to popular ballads, however, still required physical proximity and touching.

¹¹⁹ Anyone familiar with Cuban and Brazilian music knows the deep connection between African worship in those places and the popular musical styles and dances, such as salsa and samba.

The 1950s and '60s also spawned line dances, an innovation where dancers would no longer couple up, but would form a line shoulder-to-shoulder and synchronize their movements with an identical pattern of steps. Line dances were a fad that allowed people of the same sex to dance together. The Gay community may have popularized line dances before anyone else for just that reason.¹²⁰

Psychedelia, disco, and house

R&B and rock music of the early 1960s brought forth disco, the first truly worldwide music-dance craze since the military march.¹²¹

The history of disco actually has three phases: psychedelia, disco, and house. In Manhattan during the early 1960s, certain clubs opened up that exclusively played recorded music rather than live bands. These venues were known as “discotheques,” a place of “discs” or vinyl records. This trend arose at about the same time as two important musical styles: the psychedelic music

¹²⁰ Newton says, “It is likely that the Madison, a line dance that became popular in America and Europe, was invented by Grovers [specifically, Gay residents of Cherry Grove, Fire Island] in the mid- to late fifties to get around the ‘no dancing together’ rule” (72).

¹²¹ More about the military march as the first worldwide dance craze will be said later.

movement in rock, and the soul music revolution in R&B brought on by the Motown (from “Motor City” or Detroit) sound. Both of these musical genres refer to the soul. According to the *American Heritage College Dictionary* (1104), “Psychedelia” is a term taken from two Greek words: *psyche* (“soul”) and *delos* (“clear,” “visible”), which would translate as “soul vision.” Psychedelic and soul music have strong spiritual and outlaw roots, as did the hippy and Black Power movements that these genres inspired and reflected. Also note that many songs from these soul-based musical genres were dance tunes.¹²²

The 1960s were a time of experimentation with music, dance, drugs, and social awareness. Many lovers of psychedelia would get added inspiration from altered states produced by illegal drugs. The substances that caused the most profound hallucinogenic experiences, such as LSD and mushrooms, were also called “psychedelic.” The close relationship between music and drugs is expressed in some of the lyrics of psychedelic rock (and some Motown soul songs) of the times. Outstanding examples in rock are “Purple Haze” by Jimi Hendrix, “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds” (LSD) by the Beatles, and “White

¹²² On the psychedelia side, one need look no further than the music of the still-influential Grateful Dead. The vast majority of their songs were lengthy dance tunes, leisurely paced out and extended way beyond the 3 1/2-minute industry standard for rock songs. Brewster and Broughton go so far as to say, “The [Grateful] Dead did to rock music what the disco DJs would later do for dance music: they contorted it to within an inch of its life” (66).

Rabbit” by Jefferson Airplane. On the soul side, there was “Cloud Nine” by the Temptations. Discotheques were designed to enhance the psychedelic experience with flashing lights shining on the dance floor. By the mid-1960s, DJs in Manhattan and London discotheques did something that a traditional dance band could not do: they used dual turntables so that they could play one song after another without taking a break between songs. This technique of continuous music allows the dancers to enter into a sonically-driven altered state that could last for hours, a state that can be enhanced somewhat by alcohol, but more so by other recreational drugs that did not sabotage coordination as much.

It is in the discotheques of the early 1960s that dancing became completely individualized. Not only were people free to dance without touching, they no longer needed to coordinate their dance with anyone else, or even dance a recognizable step. The inspiration of movement was to come from within each person, and involved a very intimate relationship with the music. As with the twist, the rule of dance was “Do your own thing.” This was especially true with the psychedelia crowd, a predominantly European American bunch who, unlike the African American Motown crew, was not particularly interested in generating new dance crazes. Individual movement was enshrined in the person of the go-go dancer, usually a scantily-clad woman, who would dance on a box or stage by

herself (underground Gay male venues had, of course, go-go-boys, a tradition still going strong today at Gay male bars, Circuit parties, and strip joints).

When psychedelia and Motown began to fade at the beginning of the 1970s, so did the discotheque, at least for Straight people. The waning popularity of psychedelia coincided with trend-setters' rejection of the hippy, who was often negatively portrayed as stoned on drugs and belligerently anti-establishment. For men, the hippy was popularly caricaturized as a long-haired guy of questionable masculinity. The Gay crowd, however, was full of men who regularly did drugs, were automatically labeled as anti-establishment because of their sexual preference, and whose masculinity was suspect as a matter of course.

Gay men kept the tradition of the discotheque, but with some important modifications that transitioned smoothly from psychedelia and Motown to disco.

Two things came forth from the Gay community that prepared the way for the disco movement: a design for an improved discotheque (called the "disco") that was easily copied, and the DJ technique called the "slip-cue." According to Esther Newton, discos were patterned after a refurbished club on Fire Island in the summer of 1970 called the Ice Palace. Like the Manhattan and London discotheques a few years earlier, the Ice Palace had two turntables. Colored lights were set up, just as they had in discotheques. But this time, the lights were wired in sync with the sound system so that the lights would flash to the beat. Within

weeks, the pattern set by the Ice Palace was copied by another Gay club on Fire Island (Newton 243-245). Within a few years, discos would open across America and on both sides of the Atlantic.

The second innovation was called “slip-cuing.” This is a technique where the DJ synchronizes the beat of the song that is finishing with the beat of the new song in such a way that the transition occurs simultaneously on the *pulse*, the first beat of the 4-count. In other words, the pulse of the music is like a heartbeat that is never interrupted. DJ Tom Moulton, one of the DJs credited as the inventor of the slip-cue in 1974, describes the process:

By carefully watching how people danced, I noticed that they would always finish the step. In other words, they would go *one-two-three-four* and then they would walk off the floor on the one beat. The trick was to get them to begin dancing to the next song before they realized it actually was another song (Cheren 148).

Slip-cuing was made eminently easier with the rise of disco music.

Although disco music is 4/4 with the pulse on the first beat, the genius of disco was to stress *every* beat in the same way that many marching bands use a bass drum. In other words, the disco 4/4 beat is underscored with a 1/4 deep-bass pulse: “boom, boom, boom, boom.” This blending of 1/4 and 4/4 signatures is further enhanced by a high-treble counter-pulse between beats. It is the counter-pulse *tsssh* that gives disco its distinctive “boom-*tsssh*, boom-*tsssh*, boom-*tsssh*,

boom-*tsssh*” sound. The result on the dance floor was a driving beat that made it easy for people to dance.

Disco songs usually have between 115-135 beats per minute, an energetic yet comfortable pace that is a bit faster than a march but not as fast as a jog. Everything from lush orchestral strings to complex African percussion could be layered into a song with a disco format. In addition, disco songs are highly regimented, like military marches. The tempo rarely changes during the course of a song. The regularity of the disco 4/4 signature, the narrow range of beats per minute, and the unchanging tempo makes it easier for DJs to slip-cue songs together. These features also make the music exceptionally accessible to people from all ages and many different cultural backgrounds. Just about everyone, from the best dancers to the worst, could move to the music.

When DJs in the Gay male community began slip-cuing songs together to form one continuous pulse over an entire evening, they were reinventing a trend in dance that was already used in marches and jigs. Marching bands will play one tune to the next without stopping. Irish jig songs are also strung together by traditional bands so that the dancing need not stop. But there are different reasons why marchers, jig-dancers, and Gay men in discotheques use

continuous song sequences. Marches are played to keep soldiers¹²³ entertained as they move in tight formation for indefinite periods of time. The ultimate purpose of marches is to foster corporate unity with as little variation in movement as possible. Irish jigs are played non-stop for contests of endurance. Rivals will challenge each other by dancing to exhaustion until only one is left. Slip-cuing, on the other hand, has no other purpose than to enhance communal pleasure as people resonate to the same beat.

This is not to say that there are no pleasures in marching or jig endurance contests. To be in formation with one's fellows, moving together with such precision that every footstep hits the ground at precisely the same time, and listening to the sing-song of a Jody call or the steady cadence of a marching band is indeed very pleasurable.¹²⁴ The same could be said for competing with one's fellows in an Irish jig contest, overcoming fatigue, weaving one's movements around the rhythm and melody of the song, and pushing the body to its limits.

Unlike marching in unison to maintain military discipline or dancing jigs to outlast competitors, continuous mixing in Gay clubs originated solely for the build-up and prolongation of pleasure that is felt by as many people as possible as

¹²³ This would also include those who imitate soldiers, such as nonmilitary marching bands for police and sports teams.

¹²⁴ More about the relationship between marching and Circuit dancing performance will be said in Chapter 7.

they literally move together into an altered state of shared socio-somatic identity. In this manner, the Gay male dance movement is nearer in spirit to African traditions where the drumming and singing was non-stop to facilitate the production of spiritual trances (which are extremely pleasurable) in the dancers and the experience of watching spirit-inspired dancers for the spectators.¹²⁵ I submit that the focus on pleasure and altered states bordering on the spiritual are the main reasons why disco and house culture caught on worldwide, why they (and classical African religious traditions) are condemned.

Different dances came forth with disco, including line dances such as the bus stop and novelty dances like the bump. Some swing dances also re-emerged, and salsa made its debut (disco had some definite Latin impulses as well). But the old '60s psychedelia "do your own thing" ethos of individual expression as the preferred aesthetic was the general rule.

Disco eventually fell out of favor with the Straight crowd; like psychedelia, it was associated with illegal drugs and questionable masculinity. But disco never really died out in the Gay male community. Disco songs that were not terribly popular with the Straight club crowd after the "death of disco." Jimmy Ruffin's "Hold On (To My Love)" and Viola Wills' cover of Gordon

¹²⁵ The African American influence on disco and house music, thus on the Circuit, is so pronounced that the next chapter is dedicated to the subject.

Lightfoot's "If You Could Read My Mind" (both unabashedly disco songs) were wildly successful in Gay men's dance clubs after disco had faded from the contemporary music scene.

Disco's children

The techniques developed in disco were incorporated into the Rave, the Circuit, Hip-Hop, and the work-in-progress called house culture that nurtures these forms. The DJ culture that spawned both Raves and Circuit parties began in Gay clubs in 1970s Manhattan. The Rave community was formed when New York-transplanted Chicago house music (along with Detroit techno) and MDMA traveled overseas to England and the island of Ibiza in the late 1980s. The scene jelled there and quickly spread to New York, San Francisco, and eventually every major city in the United States and Canada (Silcott 1999, 17-46).

Raves and Circuit parties became popular at just about the same time in the late 1980s and throughout the '90s. Both Raves and Circuit parties open the dance floor up to single dancers. Groups of friends can dance with each other for the duration of an event and never couple up if they choose not to do so. In the fluid setting of the Circuit and the Rave scene, people have the option to go through several kinds of social interaction while on the dance floor. They may

dance by themselves, dance with some friends, dance with new acquaintances, dance with a partner, or present themselves to everybody and dance on a raised platform or box.

The average age of Ravers is younger than that of Circuiteers (22 compared to 33 years). Like Circuiteers, Ravers tend to see themselves as a tribe. DJs are stars, perhaps even more so than in the Circuit. Music can go from very slow grooves in the "chill room" (a lounge with its own DJ where the volume and room temperature tend to be lower) to fast-paced music as high as 170 BPM on the dance floor. Raves tend to have faster dance beats on average than the Circuit (perhaps attributable to the exuberance of a younger crowd). This in turn necessitates the presence of chill rooms, rarely found at Circuit parties, to give exhausted and overheated dancers a place to rest and recuperate.

Men at Raves learn quickly not to treat women the same way as they would in the alcohol-based dance culture of the typical club scene. There is more free expression—one may dance by oneself, with men, with women, with friends. The unwritten code that insists upon one-on-one dancing between a man and a woman is null and void. Men can learn to peacefully bond with *people* through the performance of Rave ecstatic dance.

Masculinity in Raves is understood differently than the Circuit. A truce exists in the battle between the sexes that extends to relations among men, as

expressed in the acronym PLUR (Peace, Love, Unity, Respect). Rave sensuality is much less sexually explicit than Circuit sensuality, which could be represented by PLUS: Peace, Love, Unity, and *Sex*. This is not to say that a man cannot be sexy at a Rave, but it is a radically different kind of sexiness for Straight men. "Beer muscles" will draw ridicule rather than respect. There is also less emphasis on muscle-as-beautiful and physical perfection. Bob Ganem, a DJ who made the switch from the Rave scene to the Circuit scene, said that body fascism is not a problem in the Rave scene because "Raves began as places where misfits could go and be accepted. There is a rejection of surface values" (Weems, "The Circuit" 205). Raver clothing is looser and shirts do not come off as a matter of course. In general, men in Raves tend to use their bodies to show off how well they can dance, while men in Circuit parties use dance to show off how good their bodies look.

Hard-core Ravers that come to the Circuit are recognizable immediately by the way they dance, which has much more bounce in the step. They often incorporate interweaving hand movements, which may be due to the fondness Ravers have for glow sticks. Light toys make wonderful patterns in the air when hand movements weave in and around, an added bonus for the observer (and the

dancer) who is high on drugs that enhance light and color, such as MDMA.¹²⁶

Some of the musical styles found in Raves (gabba, jungle, drum-and-base, for example) are alien to the Circuit, although both communities share a fondness for trance, deep house, techno-house, high-NRG, diva house, gospel house, progressive, and tribal. It is often the case that GLBT folk attend Raves in their youth because there is no pressure to conform to heterosexual norms.

I attended Ultra 2007, a two-day electronic music festival in Miami held in March that could be considered the nearest thing in Rave culture to a Circuit weekend.¹²⁷ Extravagantly huge and shamelessly commercial, Ultra attracts some 50,000 participants, mostly in their early 20s, with state-of-the-art music and lights, world-renowned DJs, and a general sense of camaraderie that typifies the nonviolent masculinity that Raves foster. The crowd was Gay-tolerant and exuberant. Some noticeable differences from Circuit events include the following four things:

1) There is a tendency for participants to face the DJ rather than each other as they danced. This tendency can be found in both Rave and underground music culture.

I attribute this phenomenon to the truce between the sexes; common ground is

¹²⁶ Ravers will sometimes do solo glowstick performances for each other in which one raver will be still, while another weaves light patterns near the unmoving observer's eyes. I was told that this was called "glowsticking."

¹²⁷ Burning Man in California and the Detroit Electronic Music Festival are two other such events.

expressed through fixing one's focus on the DJ and not on the objects of one's desire.

2) The larger performances featured go-go girls on stage with the DJs but no go-go boys. It is obvious in the way that these women were presented that the promoters were catering to Straight men, thus promoting a not-so-PLUR masculinity. Overall, however, they need not have bothered. I do not think that many people really cared. For the most part, the go-go girls were not terribly enthused about what they were doing because neither was anyone else.

3) There was the unfortunate presence of local celebrities who would talk during the performances of superstar DJs, saying things like, "DJ So-and-So is the SHIT, Miami! MAKE SOME FUCKING NOISE!" ad nauseum, sometimes for the entire set. There was some poetic justice when, during one such performance, the offensive celebrity was pelted with glow-sticks by pissed-off Ravers, accompanied by shouts of "SHUT UP!"

4) The men in the crowd were not quite metrosexual, but they were on their way. They were much more likely to use obscenities and exhibit macho posturing than Gay Circuit boys. The influence of Gay dance culture was nevertheless apparent in the way that many of these men would display their shirtless torsos, even when the temperature had dropped after sundown. This appeared to be as much a

display for the attention of other men as it was for women. In addition to that, there was no violence, and I heard no smart remarks made about Gays.

The tendency over the last hundred years has been to minimize and simplify the rules of dance so that almost anyone from any background can perform on the dance floor. The cardinal rules of house culture worldwide have been individualized to the point where the only requirements are to move to the beat and not interfere with other dancers as they do their thing. At its roots, it is an ethos of democracy and inclusion. Both Rave and Circuit communities adhere to that ethos.

American Hip-Hop's musical sensibilities differ significantly from Rave and Circuit genres, especially concerning masculinity. There is a premium placed on Straight Black male rappers who chant rhymes to sampled¹²⁸ music. Non-Caribbean/Latin Hip-Hop tends to favor a low range of beats per minute (110-120), perhaps due to a fondness for intoxicants that relax the body rather than those that charge it up. It is not unusual for gangsta Hip-Hop lyrics to praise marijuana and certain kinds of alcohol, two topics that carry little to no importance in Circuit lyrics.

¹²⁸ "Sampling" is the use of portions of pre-recorded music created by other artists. These portions are reworked and repeated, acting as a background track over which the rapper chants verses.

The Hip-Hop scene is not completely separated from the Rave and Circuit scenes. One can see young Circuiteers accessorizing “bad boy” Hip-Hop fashions. The privileging of violence in the gangsta movement within Hip-Hop, however, keeps interaction between the scenes at a minimum. Both the Rave and the Circuit scene are tolerant of same-sex sexual orientation, while Hip-Hop tends to be tolerant of homophobia and misogyny.

More important to the Circuit than gangsta men are the women who dance to Hip-Hop, a genre that is dominated by a self-proclaimed and celebrated masculine thug attitude. Although underrepresented as musical performers, Hip-Hop women have incorporated the violent lyrics and style of gangsta Hip-Hop into a rich kinesthetic vocabulary, most notably apparent in the aggressive beauty and trance-inducing quality of crumping. These movements are making their way into the Circuit community through African American performance artists and male strippers of all races.

How to dance “Gay”

Although I cannot say for certain, I suspect that most of the trends that make the Gay men’s dance movement distinctive began almost immediately after liberation. In the decade before Stonewall, Gay men’s festive culture included an

element of hide-and-seek with the law. GLBT folk had to be much more circumspect when they danced together than Straight folk. Some Gay men's clubs insisted that there be at least one woman dancing with every two men. Since the pre-Stonewall dance scene was clandestine, we have no way of accurately describing what was going on, as it could have been vastly different in private homes and clubs with varying degrees of seclusion away from police scrutiny. We do know, however, that the public bar scene was vulnerable to police intrusion at a moment's notice (Newton 244). Laughery describes the situation of uncertainty and anxiety that came with an evening of care-free frivolity:

By the 1960s, gay men and lesbians were chafing at the strict rules enforced within the bar (even when the police weren't around) by the owners nervous about their licenses. *If* a woman was on the floor to make it seem as if the men nearby were dancing with her; *if* the men were in a line and never facing one another, *If* the monitor on the ladder with the flashlight was satisfied that no one was too close; *if* the red light behind the bar wasn't flashing to indicate the sudden approach of the police—then what ensued might be called “dancing together” (Laughery 277).

After Stonewall, Gay men explored a range of movements in the privacy of their own clubs without intense police harassment. Disco music arose in the early 1970s, and not a moment too soon. It had a relentlessly driving beat that would allow men from different ethnic backgrounds and dance skills to move together in unison. The basic pattern of two people dancing together would be the norm, but dance moves would resist strict codification and remain relatively

informal in the manner of the 1960s. Newton describes the effect of disco on the dance scene in Fire Island:

Just when police harassment had ended and men could dance with men and women with women, disco almost dissolved the couple as the dancing unit. The dancing became much more overtly sexual and more group oriented, an indoor representation of the group sex that was happening in the [Meat] Rack. Drug use, which had begun in the gay community, as elsewhere, in the 1960s, seemed especially suited to the flashing lights and general erotic sweatiness of the disco. The traditional drug of choice in Cherry Grove—alcohol—developed rivals favored by the younger crowd, different colored pills called uppers and downers, marijuana, acid, and eventually cocaine (*Cherry Grove* 244).

The patterns of dance floor behavior set in the days of disco are kept alive in Straight clubs, GLBT dance clubs, and Circuit parties. Gay men at Circuit parties will dance much the same way as everyone else in the house music club scene, except for a tendency to enhance intimate body contact with multiple partners and a fondness for dancing shirtless. Sometimes groups of men dance together in conga-like lines composed of bodies facing the same direction but pressed against each other in what could be described as a communal body-rub (what I've heard some people call a "caterpillar"). They may also form a group huddle with their arms around each other. The most popular dance step is the universal side-to-side shuffle seen on dance floors around the world, which can be done solo or with a partner (or two). In the Circuit, slow songs have almost disappeared entirely in favor of a strict adherence to music played between 125-135 beats per minute.

Although there are no distinct dances *per sé* in the Circuit, there are definable characteristics in the ways that Circuiteers tend to dance. The best dancers in the Circuit (and in house culture) internalize the 32-count of house music. They do not simply move to the beat of a song, but will physically signal its pulse as well. Circuit boys and girls will usually “strike” (make a bold assertive gesture) on the first beat of a 32, 64, or 128-count, depending on how the song builds up its momentum.

The most distinctive feature in Gay men’s dance, especially the Circuit, is sensual couples-dancing. It is a dance with raw rhythmic sensuality, often expressed in crotch-to-crotch or butt-to-groin grinding and thrusting (sometimes the couple playfully simulates anal sex). It is not unusual for a couple dancing sensually together to become a threesome, foursome, or any number from five to ten men in the aforementioned “caterpillar” or “conga” line. At this point, adherence to rhythm as a cohesive mass tends to go out the window. Many men will scrupulously avoid such antics because of appearance. Raw sensuality that is undisciplined by adherence to rhythm implies lack of control.

Rhythmic sensuality is perhaps the clearest communal expression of Gay liberation possible to the Gay male body, and it dates back to the time when Gay

men began forming their own clubs.¹²⁹ “Bruising” was a dance of this sensual genre (perhaps the only one ever given a name on record) that appeared briefly in Manhattan Gay clubs in the mid-1970s. Mel Cheren, its inventor, calls it “a particularly muscular sort of dancing that featured about as much bumping and grinding as you could get outside of the bedroom, or for that matter, the boxing ring” (Cheren 166). Dancing of this sort is still enthusiastically done in Gay men’s clubs and Circuit parties. Care is usually taken, however, to not let the dance get *too* sexual, unless the dancers mean to be outrageous and funny.

Sensual dancing between Gay men goes right up to the border of what might be considered a sex act, and occasionally people cross the line. It is not unusual during Circuit parties to see men dancing together with their hands in each other’s pants.¹³⁰ Although it is by no means a dance maneuver practiced by the majority of participants at the same time, hands-down-the-pants is probably something that most Circuit boys have done at one time or another. Less frequent is the actual performance of sex acts on the dance floor. Fear of being perceived

¹²⁹ No doubt sensual dancing existed before Stonewall. There is little to nothing, however, describing how it was done. Gay liberation normalized what had previously been illegal, and finally people (such as myself) can talk about it openly.

¹³⁰ This behavior is usually seen with less frequency in dance clubs on a regular night. Holidays, however, tend to bring out more people who behave with less reserve.

as “messy” (out of control) usually inspires men to stay off their knees and keep their pants up.

CHAPTER 6
AFRICAN/AFRICAN AMERICAN CIRCUIT ROOTS

Rise up
Put your faith in Jesus
Rise up
He's got the power to heal you
Rise up
He is all you'll ever need
Rise up, everybody rise up

“Rise Up” by Funky Green Dogs featuring Tamara Wallace

During a Red Party weekend here in Columbus, Ohio, I remember going into a Gay men's clothing store to pick out a fierce outfit. A TV was playing a video of a previous Red Party, but without the sound. The shirtless men moving together looked kind of silly to me. Then the owner of the shop turned on the volume. Immediately, the people I was watching made sense. I found myself moving with them. This experience taught me an important lesson: dance in the Circuit should not be distinguished from the music of the Circuit.

I submit that the strong affinity between music and dance indicates continuity with African roots. If we are going to consider the Circuit as spiritual,

it is important to look at the music and its African origins as important factors for generating spiritual experiences.

The history of dance music in America can be traced to three major cultural sources: 1) African American R&B/disco music, 2) African and African-Latin beats from Cuba, Puerto Rico, Haiti, Jamaica, Brazil, and West/Central Africa, and 3) the Christianized music of Black gospel. All three of these sources have profoundly spiritual roots that tend to surface during the ecstasy of dance, even when the music takes a decidedly secular turn.

This chapter will explore the ways that African and African American music have exerted a profound influence on the history, music, hilarity, and spirituality of the Circuit.

Disco

Disco music is synonymous with dancing. The songs are tailored to seamlessly blend one into another, allowing dancers to immerse themselves in a continuous rhythm for hours. I can remember the reactions of older White people around me when they heard it: they thought disco (and R&B in general) was just a bit *too* catchy and complained that it was subversively hypnotic. They also found it too Black for their tastes. As one elder put it, “Are we back in Africa?”

Some scholars say that the first disco song was “Soul Makossa” by Manu Dibango of Cameroon (1972).¹³¹ The success of the “Soul Makossa” sound inspired a flood of R&B songs by Black artists with the same format of a strong, non-stop, central beat that can easily be matched up with other songs of the same genre (a distinctive trait of military marches, which can be played non-stop, one after another) and interwoven with catchy polyrhythms and melody. Some groundbreaking disco songs were “Rock Your Baby” (George McCrae), “Love Train” (O’Jays), “Who’s That Lady” (Isley Brothers), “The Sound of Philadelphia” (MFSB), the first disco remix: “Never Can Say Goodbye” (Gloria Gaynor), and “You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)” by Sylvester, the first openly Gay male disco singer.

Disco music could be separated roughly into two different styles: R&B and European. The difference lay in two things: European disco emphasized the marching beat as its main percussive component. Since many of the first European disco songs were produced in Germany, the Teutonic fondness for the sound of militaristic *märchen* found both in parades and in *Fasching* drinking songs is quite apparent, but with a decidedly effeminate flair. R&B disco music would often downplay the marching beat in favor of more elaborate syncopation

¹³¹ “Shaft” by Isaac Hayes is another candidate for first disco song. With its initial release as an extended version song in 1971, it anticipated disco 12” single remixes. Also, the horn section and lush strings mark it as an early disco prototype.

wedded with gospel-inspired vocals and elements of fusion jazz. European disco, on the other hand, tended to use orchestration more often.¹³² The lyrics of European disco tended to be all about dancing, sex, and romance, while R&B disco covered a broader range of topics.

Almost as fast as they had opened in the mid-1970s, Straight discotheques with White clientele across the nation began closing at the end of the 1970s, while Gay dance clubs increased in number. When European disco fell out of favor with the general population (in part due to the flood of formulaic songs in which the driving beat and simplistic lyrics became oppressingly mindless), R&B was still strong, producing dance music that was essentially disco but no longer labeled as such. African American musicians such as Earth, Wind, and Fire, Patrice Rushen, Chaka Khan, Parliament, and Michael Jackson continued producing dance hits with a recognizable disco format *without* calling them disco. These songs were the direct precursors to house music).

As mentioned earlier, disco was rooted in Black, Latino, and Gay musical/dance sensibilities. Most of the songs that were put into continuous play at these venues were African American soul and soul-influenced disco music. The DJ culture that fostered disco music started in Gay male dance venues. Two of the most important figures in early DJ culture were Larry Levine and Frankie

¹³² Early R&B disco, however, used a lot of orchestral music, especially in what was labeled the Philadelphia sound.

Knuckles, both of them Black Gay men. Many DJs today, both Straight and Gay, trace their trade back to the genius of these two legendary figures.

Techno-Africa: tribal espresso and the smooth wine of deep house

Circuit music is predominantly disco-turned-house with some Top 40 and techno on the side. It includes dance remixes of gospel, jazz, and Afropop songs. But there is one musical genre that is peculiar to the Circuit that is named “tribal.” The tribal sound is heavily percussive, usually with a techno edge and few vocals, inspiring those who do not care for it to label it “pots and pans.” In terms of music, a good tribal track is espresso for people who can dance. It often loops strong Afro-Cuban, Afro-Brazilian, and West African percussion riffs with bursts of synthesizer keyboard notes (called “synth stabs”). Some tribal songs incorporate traditional African religious music. I heard one that included a praise-song, appropriately enough, to Shango, the masculine Yoruba god of thunder, drums, and dance (“Chango [Inle-Gue]” by Latin Xpress featuring Gina Martin).

Another genre of dance music that has strong African/African American influences is deep house, which incorporates gospel, jazz, and Cuban/Brazilian beats in a manner that is more melodic than what one might find in a tribal track. Favored by older participants and a fiercely loyal cadre of African American

circuiteers/*house-heads*,¹³³ deep house is the most romantic musical genre of the Circuit in particular and the underground dance scene in general. It is also considered the most spiritual and uplifting genre.

Churchy divas

Gospel and jazz influences in Circuit music are often found in the vocal tracks found in what DJ Chuck Q calls “screaming diva” or “Black diva” music. Devotion to Black divas includes well-known superstars (Janet Jackson, Whitney Houston, Mary J. Blige) and singers who become Circuit superstars in their own right (Martha Wash, Pepper MaShay, Debra Cox, and Inaya Day, to name a few). The importance of Black women in Circuit music gives us pause to consider why, exactly, Gay men are so attracted to Black divas.

Perhaps it is because these women often sing about the men in their lives. Many songs have lyrics that reflect themes to which Gay men can easily relate in their own romantic relationships. A woman who is raised singing Black gospel can bring fierce intensity to a song, which is appealing to Circuit boys because it resonates with the intensity of the Circuit experience. It is not unusual to see Circuiteers singing along, especially with songs that affirm one’s identity in the

¹³³ “House-heads” refers to lovers of house music.

face of romantic adversity, such as “It’s Not Right But It’s Okay” by Whitney Houston and “U Ain’t That Good You Can Treat Me This Bad” by Sheila Brody.

For years, Gay men and gospel-belting, soul-shaking divas have supported each other. If one goes to any Gay nightclub, Circuit party, or ocean cruise, one will hear at least one upbeat spiritual anthem sung by a powerful African American woman with one of the following topics:

Love will save the world

Jesus will save the world

My God will save the world

My man rocks my world

My man is a self-centered, two-faced whore and I’m dumping his sketchy ass

The love that these fierce women receive from the Circuit community often eclipses anything they might get from the Straight world. A perfect example is Martha Wash, a venerable Circuit diva who started out in the club scene as one of two backup singers for Sylvester. While Martha Wash and Izora Rhodes were with Sylvester (who dressed in semi-drag and was quite the diva himself before he died of AIDS) they were known as Two Tons of Fun. They later formed a duo called the Weathergirls. Their biggest hit was “It’s Raining Men,” a Gay male club classic.

Her powerful voice brought her some mainstream success, but then took a vicious turn. Wash was a vocalist for two major dance music groups, C&C Music Factory and Black Box. Both groups replaced her image in music videos with that of slimmer Black women because she was deemed too large to be marketable (Bush 731).

I have seen Martha Wash perform live at Circuit parties (she also performs at other Gay functions such as Pride parades). The adoration she receives from the sea of shirtless Circuiteers is matched only by the energy she puts into her performance. I would imagine that she rarely gets the kind of response that the Circuit community gives her.

Gospel and gospel-inspired Circuit music (sometimes called “churchy”) can be seen as fulfilling a threefold function. The first is to uplift the crowd, increase its energy, and focus it on something more than simply intoxication and sex. This would be the specialty of Frankie Knuckles (a.k.a. “the Godfather of House”) who is renowned for bringing church to the dance floor, both as a DJ and a song remixer.¹³⁴

A second reason for the popularity of the gospel Circuit sound is a bit more devilish. Christ is invoked precisely because it is transgressive to do so. Circuit parties clash with the sensibilities of those Christians who would condemn

¹³⁴ Knuckles described the Warehouse (the club from which “house music” got its name) as “church for people who have fallen from grace” (Reynolds 030).

Gays to hellfire in the name of Jesus. Truthfully, the results of a gospel song played in the middle of a Circuit party full of intoxicated horny men can indeed be hilarious, bringing smiles and laughter across the dance floor. Not once, however, have I heard gospel music played in order to condemn Christians or mock God. Those who are Christian Circuit boys (and there are many) usually respond very well to hearing songs with divas praising Jesus.

A third reason is to create a melding of religious devotion and romance.

Donna Allen's dance classic "He Is The Joy" (a favorite of DJ Frankie Knuckles) can be heard in two ways: as a song praising Jesus and as a love song to her man.

Many times have come when he is gone
Yet I found the strength to carry on
But then I turn around and everything is changed
He will reach for me
And lay his hands upon my face
When I feel his touch my love will overflow
He is real to me
Now I know

Chorus: He is the joy
in my morning
in my evening
every day and night I feel the joy
When I'm lonely
something tells me
He's my guide and light
He is the joy
He takes the pain and the strife, every day of my life
every day, every day of my life

I can't explain about this love I feel
but I know it is real

so here's the deal
Sometimes I give up, I don't believe
and it breaks my heart so painfully
But then I turn around and everything is changed
He will reach for me
lay his hands upon my face
When I feel his touch my love will overflow
He is real to me
Now I know (*Chorus*)

On the other hand, the roots of some singers in homophobic Christianity can create problems for them with the Circuit community. In 2006, Kim English, a favorite African American Circuit diva, said the following about homosexuality: “I don't believe that it's a lifestyle that God agrees with” (Weems, “The Gospel According to Kim English” 52). This caused more than a little controversy, and raised questions within the Circuit community as whether Kim English should be hired to perform at Circuit events, or even if her music should be part of a Circuit DJ's repertoire. Most gospel-based divas are either quiet about their beliefs concerning homosexuality, or are openly supportive of the Gay community. The original disco diva, Donna Summer, is quite open about her support and the love she feels for Gay men.

Regardless of the way that some gospel house performers feel, however, the powerful spiritual legacy of Black gospel, an irrepressible expression of joy in the face of 400 years of oppression, strikes a cord with the tribulations Gay men have felt in their own collective past and still feel today. By fusing the romantic

with the sacred, churchy Circuit music invoking Jesus-as-lover shares an affinity with the sensual love-poetry of mystics such as Rumi, Mirabai, and John of the Cross.

PART III THE BODY-MIND

CHAPTER 7

PULSE: FROM MARCHING SOLDIER TO DANCING QUEEN

.
Mama and Papa lyin' in bed
Mama rolled over and this is what she said
Give me some
PT [Physical Training]
Give me some
PT
Good for you
Good for me
Mmmm good
Real good

Marine Corps Jody call, Parris Island, 1983

If I were to name the most important feature of the Gay men's dance movement in terms of how Circuiteers move on the dance floor, it would be the awareness of pulse, the energy imparted to the body that comes with rhythmic repetition. I submit that techniques for designing the pulse in Circuit music have their origins in military training, specifically the march.

When people move together to a common rhythm, they tend to become more than just individuals; they become each other. Humans will engage in shared rhythm to bond together when they march, sing, calm their children, play

together, and have sex. Across many cultures, men have rituals of shared rhythmic movement that bond them for the purpose of unifying them into a team so that they can be better warriors. It is not so surprising, then, to find similar rituals among Gay men to bond them together as a community for the purpose of mutual pleasure.

This chapter deals with the somatic aspects of dance, the affinity for rhythmic movement, and masculine identity.

Men, dance, war, sex, and cadence

Dancing and warfare are intertwined in history. When we look at men's dances across the ages and in different cultures, we will find that they were often martial exercises designed to imitate combat. Several cultures preserve combat dances as part of their traditional folklore, such as the khattak dance of the Pushtun (Malik 180), the haka of New Zealand's Maori, Highland fling of Scotland (Ray 173), and capoeira in Brazil.¹³⁵

Perhaps the earliest form of popular men's dance that we can reliably identify is the military march. Since the use of the phalanx (close formation of

¹³⁵ Capoeira has elements of martial arts, sport, and dance. Tradition has it that *capoeiristas* successfully defeated mercenaries who turned against the Brazilian government during the Paraguayan War in the early 19th century (Almeida 27-28).

soldiers, shoulder to shoulder, in orderly rows) by the Mesopotamians, military drill in the form of disciplined communal movement has been a constant in the history of large-scale warfare. If we define dance as two or more people moving together to the same rhythm, then marching is a form of dance. From this perspective, military marching was the first global dance craze, and it spread throughout much of the world as a valuable tool in the production of strong armies.

Marching lost its tactical importance in actual combat when modern warfare abandoned the use of phalanx formations of soldiers on the battlefield. Nevertheless, it is still invaluable in turning a group of strangers into a unified fighting *corps* (from the French word for “body”) and instilling the values of *esprit de corps* (the “spirit” or feeling of solidarity and loyalty to the group). In formal presentation of soldiers in dress uniform on public display, military cadence is still very much a part of military traditions around the world.¹³⁶

¹³⁶ No longer is marching strictly the domain of men. Women in the military are also trained in it, and there are thousands of non-military marching bands that have plenty of women in them. Many of these bands are associated with sports, especially the extremely combative American football. Although the members of marching bands associated with sports are not soldiers, the music that they play includes “fight songs” to rouse the spirits of their team (or at least get their fans riled up). The sports that utilize marching bands can therefore be considered paramilitary, at least in terms of the fans that insist upon having bands in the first place.

Some may argue that marching is not dancing because marches are not intrinsically designed for pleasure. I respectfully disagree. Marching together is profoundly pleasurable in that it allows the marchers the chance to physically perform their solidarity. As it says in the Jody call quoted earlier, “Mmm good/Real good.”

Those of us who have had much experience marching know the profound and subtle ways it allows the individual to physically bond with the group. One is no longer just one person. The magic of military march comes from the experience of merging with many people into one corporate body. As such, it can be a powerful and pleasurable experience, even when it is physically taxing. Sending soldiers to war is ugly business, so anything that could enliven the spirits of soldiers and ensure their solidarity in the face of war’s brutality would be a plus. This is why armies over the ages marched into battle, equipped not only with weapons, but also with their own drum corps.

I felt the pleasures of marching when I was in Marine Corps boot camp. Marching is not an inborn skill; moving together with any degree of uniformity is not something people can do without a lot of practice. Once my fellow recruits and I learned to move in step (there were over sixty of us in our platoon), we felt a palpable sense of pride and solidarity. This sense is enhanced if the person leading

the group is good at calling cadence, which, for all practical purposes, is a form of singing and an art form in itself.

The way we learned to march was to first start out on the same foot. In the Marine Corps, the march always starts with the left foot. This first step is emphasized more than the second, so that when we march, it is “**Left**, right, **left**, right,” etc. The emphasis on the left foot creates more energy on that step; that extra energy is the pulse of the march. Double the two-count of the left-foot pulse to 4 (2 squared) and there is another pulse on the first count of every four steps: “**One**, two, three, four, **One**, two, three, four,” etc. Double it yet again to 8 (2 to the third power) and there is an even stronger pulse on the first step: “Your **left**, your left, your left-right-left, your **left**, your left, your left-right-left,” etc. Most marches with which I am familiar double the iteration twice more to 16 (2 to the fourth power) and 32 (2 to the fifth) beats:

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord (8 beats)
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored (8+8,16 beats)
He has loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword
His truth is marching on (16+16, 32 beats, modified tune repeats itself in chorus)

Chorus, strong pulse on first beat: Glory, glory, hallelujah
Glory, glory hallelujah
Glory, glory hallelujah
His truth is marching on (32 beats)

Marches are different from other forms of music in that they are designed specifically to facilitate marching above anything else. The consistent iterations of 2, 4, 8, 16, and 32 make marches predictable, reliable, and psychophysically compelling. The pulse of the march acts as the common heartbeat for the unified body-mind of the marchers. The sound of everyone's boots hitting the pavement at the same time not only unifies the participants; it also energizes them much like a strong pulse of blood from the heart energizes the body.

I suspect that there are somatic reasons for people's affinity with the binary beat, and that pulse tends to increase in powers of 2. The body itself is binary, with a right and a left side. Heartbeat is binary. A beat is actually two parts: the beat itself, and the silence that follows it. In the space of a heartbeat and the silence that follows, the pulse or surge that the body feels is when the heart contracts and sends blood surging through our bodies. Our most basic view of the world and ourselves is that of binaries: hot and cold, darkness and light, male and female, friend and enemy. When we walk (a shared trait for all of humankind who are not disabled), it is a binary movement. And when we fight a war, it is framed as a duel.

The shared experience of walking makes marching useful in molding armies, especially for armies made up of people from different backgrounds. Dance comes in many forms with many rhythms and pulses. But regardless of

one's background, people walk basically the same. Since walking is universal, it is no wonder that military marching has been so popular throughout the world.

The pulse of marching gets tedious if not accompanied with music, and not every formation is accompanied with a marching band. But bands are not necessary; we can produce music with the power of voice. For a platoon of soldiers, their voices are regulated by one chorus leader who *calls cadence*, the rhythm by which the group will move as one unit. The best callers of cadence in the Marine Corps can quicken the pulse of the march with the rich variety of Jody calls available to them, including the one that I quote at the beginning of this chapter. Jody calls are meant to inspire the troops. Often, they are humorous and full of sexual innuendos (including homoerotic ones), such as the following:

Casey Jones was a son of a bitch
He wrecked his train in a whorehouse ditch
He lined up a hundred whores against the wall
Swore to Hell he'd fuck them all
Fucked 98 till his balls turned blue
Then backed off jacked off and fucked the other two
Casey Jones went to Hell
Fucked the Devil and his wife as well
Four little demons up against the wall
Said, "Get him out of Hell 'fore he fucks us all!"¹³⁷

¹³⁷ Variations of "Casey Jones" lyrics can be found in *The Erotic Muse* by Ed Cray.

From marching to disco to house music to the Circuit

But the pleasures associated with marching are secondary to larger purposes, such as discipline and instant obedience to orders. People do not usually march just because they like to march. Social dancing, however, is its own reward.

I submit that disco music took the 8, 16, and 32-count pulses from martial music. After American R&B music began welding dance music to the firm foundation of the march to create disco in the early 1970s, European disco added the strong, constant thump-thump-thump of German martial music. This transformation of the military march as an instrument of war into a non-militarized form was not a new innovation; war dances such as the Highland fling have been adopted by societies for peaceful expression.

House music in the 1980s emerged seamlessly from disco with further refinements in pulse that would cause the energy of a song to build up and climax. Most early house music was like disco; the pulse would shift from 16 to 32, according to how the song producer “built” the song. A specific genre of house music called “progressive” set the 32-pulse in stone, and then began to shift the

pulse to the 64 and 128-beat pulses as the music progressively gathers energy with each iteration and then surges forth in sonic waves.¹³⁸

The relationship between the beat and the pulse may be likened to that of particle to wave. In terms of empirical observation, beats of a house music song are particular and distinct. Pulse, however, is subjective and based on the reaction of the listeners to beats as cumulative stimulants that provoke the body to physically mimic the cadence by moving with it. The various pulses going on at 2, 4, 8, 16, and 32-counts combine together to help create a surge of energy that will crest and uplift the dancers in a wave of sonic energy. When a Circuit DJ wants to mix one song into another, the first thing the DJ looks for is the first note of the 32-count phrase in both the incoming and outgoing songs.

Circuit DJs go beyond the 32-count. During the 1990s, adherence to 64 (2 to the sixth power), 128 (2 to the seventh power), and even 256 (2 to the eighth power)-count pulses became part of the structure of Circuit music. In order not to disrupt the larger-count surge-pulse, Circuit DJs may go further than simply matching songs up at the 32-count, and opt to synchronize incoming and outgoing songs with the 64 (2 to the 6th power), 128-count (2 to the 7th), or 256 (2 to the 8th) build-up. The regularity and predictability of the pulse in Circuit musical format

¹³⁸ Some of my sources indicate that progressive house got its inspiration from Gay DJs who first remixed dance music according to a stricter 32-count format. These pioneers include Jimmy Stuard, Frankie Knuckles, and Junior Vasquez.

make it easier for the participant-dancer to synchronize personal performance with a song, even when it is heard for the first time.

Just as fidelity to the 32-count pulse is what makes martial music ideal for marchers, the larger iterations of 64, 128, and 256 make Circuit music *dancer's music* above all else. It also makes Circuit music unfit for marching; all of those additional pulses tend to summon much more motion than simply walking. Hips, arms, shoulders, and head start moving as well, and all that movement would disrupt the essential *ordnung* of military formations in motion.

It is also important to consider that rather narrow range of beats per minute (BPM) that is found in Circuit music. Most marches are about 120 BPM, about the pace of an energetic (but not rapid) walk. “Double-time” or jogging is about 145 BPM (Jody calls are double-time cadence). Circuit music BPM is between 125-135 BPM, between a walk and a jog. It also approximates the BPM of the average heartbeat when walking at that same pace. I submit that the reason for the narrow range of BPM in the Circuit is that 125-135 BPM is a pace that is energetic enough to keep people alert, but not so fast that it wears them out.¹³⁹

Circuit DJs have found that participants can be whipped into a frenzy when using higher-count iterations based on powers of 2 (which, of course, carry

¹³⁹ Raves, which attract a younger crowd than the Circuit, tend to have a much broader range of BPM. Most of Rave music is more rapid than Circuit music, with a range from 135-170 BPM (except in the “chill” or non-dancing areas for relaxation, where the music could be anywhere from 100-120 BPM).

all of the lesser pulses within the longer count). It is up to the person who “remixes” the song in the Circuit pulse format as to which iterations carry the strongest surge in the song’s sonic build-up. If a song was not originally produced with Circuit sensibilities, the remixer will modify it to build up to the 64, 128, and 256 beats per iteration because the original structure of most songs does not assign a strong pulse higher than 32 beats.

Higher iterations of Circuit music are accompanied by a sonic build-up accomplished by doubling the basic thump-thump-thump measuring the song’s beats per minute in a rapid-fire sonic burst just before a major 128-pulse. According to DJ Tracy Young (personal communication, May 22, 2007), this build-up makes the music “sexy” because it creates a climactic surge that sonically washes over the dance floor, sending participants into higher states of rhythm-induced pleasure that they in turn translate into more vigorous dancing, hands in the air, ear-to-ear smiles, and shouts of joy.

Most house dancing (including Circuit dancing) is from side to side, stepping twice with one foot at a time and completing a full-body movement in 4 beats. Obedience to the four-count and the higher powers of 2 is especially strong in the Circuit community because of the importance of a clear, regular pulse that the dancers can “strike” on the 16, 32, 64, and 128-count iterations.

The segue

Another important factor in the narrow range of BPM and adherence to the 32-count in Circuit music is manipulation of the segue between songs. Since the basic rhythmic format of songs is similar, it is fairly easy for DJs to do more than simply switch from one song to another seamlessly. They may also blend two songs together, creating a temporary composition that only exists for the few moments that the songs can comfortably overlap.

These segues can be quite stunning when done adroitly. Circuiteers tend to know their music. When a DJ blends songs as they switch, the result is a musical treat in which the old song interweaves with the new, often before the audience knows what the new song is. I find it difficult to explain what this does to the dancers; it usually hits them unconsciously before they realize what the DJ is doing, creeping up on their awareness like a rising tide. The new rhythms tease participants as they try to determine what the new song is. The surge of recognition renders the familiar (which too easily translates as *boring*) into something fresh and delightful. The longest I have ever heard a DJ keep a segue going successfully is 30 seconds.

The importance of iterations beyond the 32-count, the double-time of beats just before a major pulse, and the magic of a well-done segue in Circuit

musical technology reflect the goals of the Circuit experience. Military marching can get soldiers from Point A to Point B and/or allow them to display themselves in all of their serious finery as a unified corps. The Circuit is also about display, but it is not limited to the display of *gravitas* and sameness. All of the intricate beats and surges will bring forth different levels of playfulness and skill from participants, giving everyone the chance to excel or simply have fun. Within this on-the-spot innovative setting, the Circuit is also designed to launch participants as a corps into progressively more intense levels of pleasure for pleasure's sake as members of the crowd perform for the sake of the crowd and their own amusement. The build-up of energy moves the corps, not from place to place, but from normalcy to ecstasy.

CHAPTER 8

FERCE

fierce (firs) *adj.* **1.** Having a savage and violent nature; ferocious. **2.** Extremely severe or violent; terrible. **3.** Extremely intense or ardent; *fierce loyalty*. **4.** Strenuously active or resolute.

The American Heritage College Dictionary 507

In the wordplay of the Circuit community, one of the highest compliments is to be called “fierce.” It means, basically, that a person deserves admiration. One may have a fierce body, fierce attitude, or fierce haircut. A drag queen in a striking outfit may be fierce. DJs who play a good set are considered fierce. People who dance well are fierce. Those who are the life of the party are fierce as well. Fierceness is aggressive, in-your-face self-confidence. It never implies, however, that one is savage, violent, ferocious, or terrible. In the performance of fierceness, physical violence is unnecessary and undesirable.

What makes the Circuit so fierce? What are the social dynamics behind Circuit performance that result in a masculinity that is performed with intense self-affirmation but is almost completely devoid of violence? Three factors have been consistent in giving the Circuit its fierce character and channeling aggression

away from violent expression: physical attraction *to* the muscular body over physical intimidation *by* the muscular body, sensuality over sexuality, and us-for-us solidarity over us-against-them exclusion.

Attraction over Intimidation

Masculinity involves appearance and behavior that reinforce one's identity as a properly gendered male. It is supposed to be the outward signs of a man's inner being and his true essence as a man. It is seen as natural. But the reality of masculinity is that it is much more the social performance expected of men, and much less a universal biological imprint that comes with being born male.¹⁴⁰ Expressions of masculinity are learned, not genetically encoded. Most men, Gay and Straight, become masculine through observation and the desire for the approval of other men (and, to a lesser degree, women).

Our environment outside teaches us who we are supposed to be inside. As J. H. Van Den Berg states,

¹⁴⁰ Judith Butler says that gender is “a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler 33). Speaking for myself, the fact that masculinity is a performance that is intrinsically a lie does not lessen its erotic appeal. The casual display of “natural” masculinity, as artificial as I know it is in reality, is extremely attractive to me. As a man who prides himself in cultivating strong distaste for falsehood, I find my hypocritical infatuation with the masculine disturbing, amusing, and educational.

[Sexuality] is not in the first place to be found “in the subject” or “on” his body, but shows itself as world. Sexuality appears in the other, who is met, in the advertisement, the shop window, the reading matter, the landscape of the twilight, the aspect of the street (Van Den Berg 109).

Those images of manliness that boys are taught to become, however, are only occasionally realized. Men rarely become man enough. As boys, we see our role models and then look at ourselves, only to see that we do not measure up one way or another. This sense of inadequacy follows many of us into adulthood. Nowhere is it more apparent than in front of a full-length mirror.

Many studies of the male body focus on (or rather obsess with) the penis or its phantasmic super-shadow, the phallus. For some men, their dick (either literally or figuratively) is indeed their passport into manliness. But it is one small part of a much larger package. The most obvious form of embodied masculine power is a man's musculature. Shirts and ties can hide a pudgy belly somewhat; they do not hide a muscular frame. Regardless of one's status in the office, the factory, or the institution, a muscular body commands respect without even trying. And muscle indicates power, masculinized, irrefutable, casual power, even when that body belongs to a woman.¹⁴¹

¹⁴¹ Many men see a muscular woman as a threat to their own masculinity. In interviews with female bodybuilders, Maria Lowe says, "Most [female] bodybuilders gave examples of strangers making unsolicited remarks about their physiques, some of which were imbued with threats of physical violence" (Lowe

In the modern West, the muscular male body began to be celebrated and marketed as the masculine ideal for the masses in the middle of the 19th century (Budd xi). At the end of the 19th century, it had its first superstar, Eugen Sandow (b. Ernst Müller). Famous both for his physique and his strength, Sandow promoted what was then called "physical culture" and linked his own regimen to athletic and military training (Budd 37-44).

Physical culture usually emphasized proper diet, exercise, and sexual/drug abstinence (sometimes including medicinal drugs) for building a sound body and mind. From this movement came magazines dedicated to both male and female physiques. In turn, magazines dedicated to the beauty of the male physique were favorites of homosexual men, who could mask the erotic appeal of scantily clad muscular men behind chaste and publicly acceptable admiration for the bodybuilder, akin to hero worship of a sports figure. Nevertheless, physical culture magazines were often considered pornographic, and post office officials sought to ban them (Nealon, *Foundlings* 102).

Traditionally, a big-muscled man is assumed to be more powerful because of the obvious relationship between muscle and physical strength. But this

44). Bias against them is also present in competition: "Many in the sport, particularly officials and judges, consider it extremely inappropriate for women to take steroids [as opposed to men taking steroids] because they become too muscular and thus less feminine, whereas in male bodybuilders muscularity and masculinity are seen as compatible" (Lowe 75).

relationship is just one side of the power coin, the other being the relationship between muscle and beauty. A muscular man is also seen as more beautiful.¹⁴² Two connotations of power exist in muscle: the power to repel and punish (violence), and the power to attract and give pleasure (beauty). These connotations tend to be gendered according to the viewer. Roughly speaking, men are supposed to *respect* a muscular man, while women should *desire* him. The Gay male community undermines this distinction by openly celebrating the homoerotic beauty of the muscular male body and mocking the physically aggressive side of the muscular man by giving him “soft” or feminine nicknames, such as “gym bunny,” “muscle queen,” or “muscle Mary.”

True to its Gay folk roots, the Circuit community promotes a fierce masculine ideal of the muscular man without the connotation of violence. This is how it goes: a muscular man who does not behave violently focuses attention instead on his body's beauty. He could become violent if he so chooses but does not because that would make him less attractive (in the Gay community, “muscle Mary” is the term reserved for the built man who acts tough, but who is nevertheless nothing but a big old fag like the rest of us). This renders the appearance of physical strength to the status of *accessory*, like a nice pair of shoes

¹⁴² Muscle in men is a marker of beauty in Western discourse. The overabundance of muscle out of proportion to the body, however, need not be seen as beautiful.

or a college degree.¹⁴³ By accessorizing muscles, the Circuit community trivializes their utilitarian features. When the muscular body is made an accessory, its importance as a means for lifting heavy objects or fighting is made secondary to its aesthetic importance as a means for stimulating the admiration and sexual desire of others.

Outside of the Gay community, most men will rarely ever say that another man's body is beautiful because such a statement changes the body from an object of respect to an object of desire. These same men will have no problem saying that a car, dog, or baby is beautiful, which gives us some indication of how extreme the need for many Straight men to define themselves as violent/active rather than homosexual/passive.

The muscular male body is understood in the Circuit to be active and attractive in both penetrator and penetrated sexual roles. According to R. W. Connell, Gay relations are marked by their reciprocity. Sex and its inherent roles for dominance and submission are less rigidly constructed for Gays than for Straights (Connell 162). Either person can be the penetrator and there is little to no stigma attached to the receptive partner behaving in a sexually aggressive

¹⁴³ The most fascinating aspect of the Stonewall Awakening is that violence was initiated to alert the police and the city authorities that the Gay community did indeed have "muscle," but would only use it when sorely provoked. It was a necessary accessory, so to speak, donned so that the message of Gay pride would be taken seriously. Unlike other riots, there was never any deep-seated hatred of a target group by the insurgents. No call was issued for the death of anyone.

manner during love-play (what members of the Gay community call an "aggressive" or "power bottom").

In terms of wordplay, Straight male discourse concerning sex-as-violence does not enjoy the same currency. The notion of "fucking" another man, either physically or as an insult such as "Fuck you!" is not intrinsically degrading and does not trigger the same demand for violent response that informs Straight masculine social dynamics. In addition, since "cussing" is often used as a precursor for violent behavior, it is seen as ugly, not masculine, behavior. Take into account the perception of the violent man as unattractive, and the result is that there is not much swearing at Circuit parties. When "Suck my dick" is an invitation, it loses much of its power as an insult.

Because men, not women, are the preferred objects of desire in the Circuit, the dynamics of sexual competition are radically modified. Rather than being in competition *against* each other, men are in competition *for* each other. The need for a violent response toward a rival is tempered by the fact that he is potentially an object of desire as well. The Circuit, with its acceptance of casual physical contact on the dance floor, reduces violence even further.

There are, inevitably, Straight women who enjoy Circuit events because they are disgusted with the typical Straight bar scene. Many women express relief at being able to enjoy the pleasures of dancing close with well-groomed men

without the hassle of cheap come-ons and the dreaded potential for unwanted groping. It should be pointed out that public harassment of women is often part of the performance of Straight, not Gay, masculinity. It is done for the benefit of other Straight men, who bond with each other by setting up a common enemy in the so-called battle of the sexes.¹⁴⁴

This is not to say, however, that lack of violence means that there is no aggressive behavior in the Circuit. As Lionel Tiger notes, violence is a type of aggression; it is not synonymous with aggression (Tiger 1969, 158). Masculinity for both Straight and Gay men is based upon vanity and dominance. Aggression sometimes arises in expressions of disdain from "hot" men for those who are less built and less beautiful.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ Michael Kaufman says, "boys [who were harassing girls] weren't doing it primarily to have an impact on the girls. They were doing it for the other boys. They were proving to the other boys and, presumably, to themselves, that they were real men" (Kaufman 220). Compare this with Maria Lowe on mistreatment of female bodybuilders: "Most of those [men] who felt compelled to make negative comments about the women's muscular physiques were men in groups while the female was by herself." (Lowe 44). Muscular Gay men must occasionally bear the same group taunts and threats when they, as couples, "threaten" Straight men by holding hands or kissing in public.

¹⁴⁵ Alan M. Klein speaks of the vanity of bodybuilders: "It is true the narcissist craves attention. He or she thirsts for admiration, but, ironically, tends to disdain those who give it" (Klein 206). Nowhere is this more apparent than in the Circuit in its not-so-stellar moments.

The dance floor is an exhibition space, a highly competitive arena for the display of the body and the performance of self for all to see. This leads to a preoccupation with being seen only with those who are attractive enough to merit one's attention. Selective male bonding with only the right kind of men leads to aggressive behavior toward those who do not make the grade, a confirmation of Tiger's hypothesis that male bonding goes hand-in-hand with male aggression (190). Occasionally, nasty misogynist echoes from the Straight world can be heard, not against women, but against non-muscular effeminate men and drag queens that do not embody the perceived Circuit ideal.¹⁴⁶ At its worst, the Circuit can be an ego-crushing snub-fest when body fascism takes over.

Body fascism reached its peak with a members-only group dedicated to having orgies that were restricted to only a select few during Circuit parties called MBHB (Miami Beach Hard Bodies). This series of carnal gatherings was held in hotel rooms in which certain men were chosen because of their physical beauty and given invitations. Supposedly, there was a bouncer-of-sorts at the door,

¹⁴⁶ Folklorist Joseph Goodwin states, "A reluctance to accept female impersonators and flaming queens is also common in the [gay] subculture, since many gays feel that such people are 'politically incorrect,' reinforcing straights' stereotypes of gays and thereby hindering the cause of liberation" (61). This is true in the Circuit as well, since many of the muscular "Circuit boys" see themselves as the antithesis of the "faggy" stereotype. Nevertheless, most Circuit weekends will have at least one performance by drag performance artists. Besides, muscularity does not guarantee masculine bearing. Some of the biggest muscle men in the Circuit can be quite nelly at times.

screening potential hard bodies before they were allowed entry (there was a cover charge). At one point, there was supposedly clothing with the “MBHB” logo and MBHB business cards, creating a clique within the already cliquish Circuit milieu. MBHB died out at the beginning of the new millennium.

Body fascism tends to have a racist edge—not all muscular bodies are equal. The White man's body is privileged, although some leeway is given to the light-brown Latino body if it is not too far from the White ideal. This is par for the course for American culture in general, which, as Richard Dryer notes, "constructs the white man as physically superior, yet also an everyman" (Dryer 269). The muscular White male body (especially the front of the torso) is the most common icon in advertisements for Circuit events. When people of color are shown, they are usually among White models, and rarely is a non-White model the central figure.¹⁴⁷ Absence of violence does not include the absence of racism and subtle forms of aggression and alienation that come with it. There is, paradoxically, an inherent contradiction in the White ideal. Most White Circuit boys make it a point to tan their skin. As a race, White is preferable. But as a color, white is seen as sickly, especially at outdoor events. Actual melanin content

¹⁴⁷ Racially-inclusive advertisements have been produced by Circuit parties that are situated in week-long community festivals, such as Miami Winter Party and Montreal Black and Blue.

in skin notwithstanding, it can be a greater challenge for men of color to feel accepted, especially as desirable bodies.¹⁴⁸

On the other hand, body fascism also undermines discrimination based solely on age. Since muscle is the marker for both masculinity and physical beauty, an older muscular man (popularly known as a "daddy") is a legitimate object of desire. The appreciation for a shaved head or a crew cut in the Gay community helps older men significantly. Fierceness has no age limit.

Sensual over Sexual

José Torrealba, the creator and director of the Circuit documentary *Got 2 B There*, describes the Circuit as a place where Gay men can touch each other without having sex (Weems, "The Circuit" 186).¹⁴⁹ In order to understand the full meaning of this statement, one must realize that the Gay male community is

¹⁴⁸ This may change in the very near future, however. The demographics of the Circuit population are shifting with the increasing patronage of non-European Latinos and Asian Americans. I predict that we will eventually see a broadening in what is perceived as the masculine ideal. Nevertheless, I do not see any change concerning the privileging of the muscular body.

¹⁴⁹ In 1999, José Torrealba produced *Got 2 B There* (175 BPM Productions), a documentary on the Circuit in which he interviewed DJs, producers, activists, scholars, participants, and critics of the Circuit.

tolerant of behaviors that the general public would consider excessive, especially sexual behaviors. Since sex is such a casual part of Gay male life, it would seem a paradox that the Circuit, a gathering of shirtless, intoxicated, flirty men, would not degenerate into one big orgy on the dance floor.

One reason it does not is due to the abundant number of Gay male venues and communities that cater to orgiastic gatherings. David Nimmons states that “[Gay men] have arguably the most complex, flourishing, nuanced sexual culture the planet has ever known. No other population alive today enjoys a sexual milieu so elaborated and robust, so richly creative, as ours” (Nimmons 81). Most Gay communities have bathhouses, sex clubs, and "back rooms" for this purpose, places that a significant number of Gay men avoid because they are *too* blatantly sexual. The PnP (Party and Play) community uses the internet to hook up, do drugs, and have sex, completely bypassing the club and Circuit scenes.

The problems of drug addiction and sexual irresponsibility in the Gay community are far from being limited to the Circuit. Scott Van Tussenbrook, writer for Circuit Noize, describes PnP:

A whole lexicon of terms has grown up around this “scene,” and most seem to downplay what's happening or at least avoid using scary words. “Chem friendly” in somebody's profile is a nice way of saying “drug user.” But spend any time with these guys and you find that “chem friendly” really means, “I can't have sex without crystal [methamphetamine].” The whole thing is so out of control they might as well cut to the chase. “Looking to party n play. U?” as an opening line might as well be, “I've bumped [snorted drugs] myself silly. Why don't

you come over here and just drive your car up my ass?” (Weems, “The Circuit” 203)

Circuit parties, even notoriously sexual ones like the New York City Black Party (which features live sex shows and a big dark "back room" for group sex), are primarily about the pleasures of dance. Sexual activity is, for the most part, restricted to things that men can do with their pants on while moving to the beat, and drug use is most commonly restricted to the enhancement of dance floor pleasures, not as an end in itself. Too much drug ingestion leads to the reduction of those pleasures and the tragic¹⁵⁰ possibility of looking like a buffoon.

A different range of pleasures is generated in the Circuit that relegates intoxication and sex to secondary importance. The experience of transcendent solidarity is by definition an intimately communal phenomenon. Orgies, on the other hand, are rather impersonal affairs, almost mechanical in preparation and execution. Gaiety is not the hallmark of bathhouses and sex clubs, which typically feature somber-faced men who prowl around with grim intensity, much like the Vatican. The aesthetics of an orgy tend to be limited to those things that can accommodate the immediate craving for the sexual over anything else. The Circuit involves many more pleasures and levels of social interaction than the raw expression of orgasmic heat. Sexiness takes on new dimensions with a dancing

¹⁵⁰ “Tragic” is an emic term for something that is terribly unstylish. It is the opposite of “fierce.”

body as opposed to a stationary body or a rutting body. Close dancing, while highly erotic, is disciplined by the beat of the music and the critical gaze of others. Since the Circuit is held in public space, a body that obeys its own sexual rhythm rather than the beat is not fierce. It appears disjointed, out of sync with the communal flow, and basically silly.

One important factor that keeps affairs sensual rather than sexual is a collective sense of public propriety. Attractiveness is a most desirable quality; anything that reduces one's beauty is to be studiously avoided. Lack of control is not attractive. Although many participants feel the need to drink alcohol or do recreational drugs before they feel comfortable enough to dance and be sensual, being overly intoxicated or over-sexed can cost one status on the dance floor. Not everything goes.

Rules dictating that couples only dance sensuously with each other, however, are not part of Circuit ethics. Boundaries that set couples in committed relationships apart from swinging singles (and other couples) are lowered to a degree that would be scandalous to those outside of the Circuit/Leather scene, even by Gay male conventional standards. The need to mark, survey, and protect one's sexual property is relaxed. Men involved in serious relationships can dance with other men quite intimately and still consider themselves monogamous. This

in turn reduces the need for hypermasculine displays of violence in defense of one's honor.

Couples just entering the Circuit scene may find themselves both enthusiastic and anxiety-ridden about the prospect of engaging in public displays of sensuality with other men. They may set elaborate rules concerning who may dance with whom and in what fashion until the couple becomes comfortable with the scene and with themselves. Many people in the Circuit community consider the acceptance of casual dance floor contact to be a healthy expression of sexuality that can strengthen, not weaken, the bonds of commitment.

As with most things in the Circuit, the relaxation of rules concerning sexual property is something that occurs in Gay male society in general but is more pronounced in the Circuit. Michael Warner describes the intricate Gay male social-sexual network:

Try standing at a party of queer friends and charting the histories, sexual and nonsexual, among the people in the room. You will realize that only a fine and rapidly shifting line separates sexual culture from many other relations of durability and care. The impoverished vocabulary of Straight culture tells us that people should be either husbands and wives or (nonsexual) friends. Marriage marks the line. It is not the way many queers live. If there is such a thing as a Gay way of life, it consists in these relations, a welter of intimacies outside of the framework of professions and institutions and ordinary social obligations (Warner, *Trouble* 116).

Monogamy for Gay men often does not include total sexual exclusivity. Most couples, in fact, do not expect it. Pointing out this fact about Gay society, Nimmons says,

When a clear majority of stable, successful long-term Gay couples redraw the rules to include outside sex, and still about a quarter don't, it says that *we have clearly elaborated a parallel set of acceptable cultural norms* [italics his]. It seems that the natives of these lavender provinces are not so much cheating as choosing (Nimmons 85).

Proof of this can be seen in the abundance of boyfriends and happily married men who attend Circuit parties with their partners. I have met "Circuit couples" who have been together 20 years or longer.

The biggest reason that sensual dancing is preferred over sexual acts is, interestingly enough, pleasure. Overtly sexual expression tends to isolate those who engage in it, which undermines communal solidarity. The combination of sensuality and dance can be wonderfully erotic because it approaches but does not actualize the sexual act.

Erotic sensations thrive on the border of the forbidden. Dancing sensually with another man, but not allowing the dance to become full-fledged sex, can be highly arousing precisely because the dancers approach an erotic barrier that is bent but not shattered. Disciplining the sex drive, forcing one's movements (and one's partner) to conform to the beat, feeling the intensity of the music and physical union with it, the exhibitionistic charge that comes with expressing

sexual heat in public without actually resorting to sex, all of these are part of the performance of masculinity as it is danced in the Circuit.

I remember a friend of mine describing an incident when his new-found love wanted him to leave the dance floor and go back to his hotel room for sex. His response was, "And quit dancing? You must be out of your mind!"

Solidarity

Whether culturally learned or biologically hard-wired, there are some pleasures that men can only feel when they bond with other men. This includes the deep social pleasure of feeling like "one of the boys." Most of the sports industry, bar culture, rioting mobs, terrorist cells, firefighters, lifeguards, police, and the military depend on consistent production of this pleasure in order to function.

To be sure, views of male bonding differ in Straight and Gay worlds. Masculine solidarity in the Circuit takes on certain characteristics that differentiate it from other kinds of male bonding.

People do not go to large public gatherings simply to see a game, watch a movie, hear music, or listen to an evangelist. A large part of the pleasure that drives these events is the experience of coming together in large numbers.

Because of ingrained distrust of strangers and respect for the personal space of other people, however, participants need a reason (an excuse, really) for these gatherings to take place. Typically that reason is to join an audience that witnesses a performance together.

Riots and uprisings, on the other hand, undermine the audience/performer distinction. In the zone of conflict, the stage of performance is not fixed. Witnesses may all too easily be incorporated into the performance, whether they choose to participate or not. The participants (rioters, law enforcement, and innocent bystanders) are the stars. The relaxation of propriety between the rioters, police, and their respective targets can be exhilarating for the aggressors on whatever side.

There are great pleasures to be felt while participating in communal violence; not the least is a profound feeling of collective belonging, often with strong spiritual implications. A profound sense of freedom and manliness can accompany the willingness to suffer for a cause and the conscious rejection of moral rules against harming others. The rationale for causing others tremendous damage is based upon a higher morality: those who have suffered (or are willing to suffer) have earned the right to inflict suffering.

This is apparent when one looks at sports riots. The driving ethos behind being a fan is faithfulness to one's team, even when it loses. Victory signals

vindication of one's devotion. In contact sports (i.e. sports that involve physical violence), male fans may choose to imitate the beloved team and establish their dominance by rioting, which is justified because of the myth of suffering and humility that they have endured. The sacrifices of their team, coupled with the resurrection of the team once it achieves victory, fuels the performance of violent masculinity as they assert to the universe, their opponents, and law enforcement, "We're #1!" That same masculine language of sacrifice, resurrection, and dominance can be found in military, terrorist, and religious ritual that involves the execution of fellow humans.

I call this form of male bonding *punitive solidarity*.¹⁵¹ It is the basis for the thrill felt by participants and vicariously by the fans of martial arts, boxing, most team sports, and war. Punitive solidarity has also inspired atrocities and massacres throughout history, including the Crusades, the destruction of the World Trade Center, Wounded Knee, Rwandan/Cambodian massacres, and Nazi concentration camps.¹⁵² The pure morality of domination as the ultimate defense runs strong in the human psyche, and can sweep away all other ethical concerns.

¹⁵¹ As any fan of women's sports can affirm, punitive solidarity can also be found in women's team sports, martial arts, boxing, and military culture.

¹⁵² In terms of unruly sports fans, punitive solidarity was elevated to an art form when, in 2002, Ohio State fans did more than the usual dumpster-burning and car-overturning; they worked as a team to stack cars on top of one another and then set them on fire.

As popular movies and sports demonstrate to us time and again, Americans are addicted to the violent and subversive pleasures of punitive solidarity. Occasionally, we express repugnance and act as if we are peace-loving, but our very language betrays us. We use the language of war and armed conflict for all kinds of things in order to rally popular support. We have declared war on terrorism, drugs, cancer, and disco. Our political parties are comfortable with declaring war on each other, even to the point of calling the money they raise for their political campaigns a “war chest.” We describe the romantic relationship between men and women as “the battle of the sexes.” Rarely do we question the ethics of such language, or the fact that we love to tell our children stories of war in which thousands, millions, even billions of people die. We only mourn the casualties on one side of the conflict in tales such as *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and *Star Wars*, stories where the righteous warrior is sanctified and made holy through sacrifice.

The overwhelming majority of combatants in the world, be they rioters, warriors, or athletes, are men. I submit that this is true precisely because of profound pleasures, at times ecstatic, that come with male bonding through punitive solidarity. The expression of masculinity through the performance of

violence pervades our culture, as is the necessity for transgressive excess to achieve masculine status.

Combatants cannot bond together by themselves. They are dependent on their targets, real and imagined, for team identity. *We* are defined by *them*.¹⁵³

Communal dances, like riots, are events in which the crowd is the show and the line between spectator and performer is undermined significantly. Unlike riots, however, most communal dance is not dependent upon an "other" for participant identity. This does not mean, however, that there is no competition. In many heterosexual dance settings, competition between men is easily observable, particularly between men from different cliques that affirm their bonds in bars by throwing their weight around. Tiger theorizes that male bonding inevitably leads to aggression (Tiger 1969, 190). Although officially forbidden, popular rules of behavior for masculinity and intoxication regularly result in violence, often because men who bond together while drinking behave aggressively to those outside of the group. Attempts to limit male violence through dress codes (no

¹⁵³ I think it is probable that, in many cases, the function of riots is to incite both rioters and law enforcement into using each other for greater displays of punitive solidarity. This is done by aggravating the opposite side to engage in more serious transgressions by inflicting violence or the threat of it, thus increasing the pleasures of bonding that come with manly self-defense.

sports caps, tank tops, athletic wear¹⁵⁴) are futile. They cannot eliminate what is understood as *natural* masculine behavior.

Communal dance in the Circuit has rules for masculinity and intoxication that do not naturalize violent behavior. There is a sense of security in that the Circuit is a safe space for Gay men to flirt and dance with each other with no fear of violent reprisal from Straight men. It should be noted that Gay Circuit identity is not defined against what Gay men perceive as the immorality and violence of their Straight oppressors.¹⁵⁵ There is no sense of "us" against "them," only "us."¹⁵⁶ The result is a crowd whose major competitive goal is favorable attention from as many people as possible. Everyone performs for everyone else. Consequently, there is no need for a dress code with the purpose of limiting male violence, either at the typical Gay male dance venue or at Circuit parties.

¹⁵⁴ In the production of punitive solidarity in the bar scene and boot camp, the role of sports is significant. For its part, sports discourse relies heavily on military language, themes, and metaphors.

¹⁵⁵ Goodwin says, "When gays use their folklore to cope with such pressures [tension caused by straight oppression], it serves to invalidate the straight world. In doing so, it validates the gay culture. It is this defiance that is the essence of much gay folklore" (63). The Circuit, however, carries on without demonizing or even lampooning Straight culture as much as it simply ignores it for the weekend.

¹⁵⁶ This point was brought home to me in an interview I conducted with DJ Tom McBride from Chicago. I asked him what the difference was between the solidarity of the Circuit and the solidarity of the Nuremberg rallies of Nazi Germany. He said that, unlike Nazi Germany, the Circuit is not unified against anyone (Weems, "The Circuit" 203).

In general, Gay men tend to respond to dance with much more enthusiasm than Straight men (Nimmons 165-166), reflecting a significant facet of gendered body perception. Gay male sensibilities dictate that the expressive male body is admired for its beauty, something that Straight men are traditionally not supposed to do (or at least admit). The following statement by somatics scholar Seymour Kleinman sums up the prevalent Straight male understanding of the masculine body:

It appears that in our pursuit of and subservience to game and sport, the body almost acts as an obstacle which must be overcome. The body and its movement is viewed as the means to attain the ends of a game. We seek neither significance nor meaning to human movement (Kleinman 123).

In the heteronormative worldview, the athletic body appears to reinforce the value of dominance rather than solidarity because it is typically described as a utility, even a machine, for victory over other men.¹⁵⁷ This does not mean that admiration is absent from Straight male sensibilities; watching the athletic male body in action gives the Straight male observer the necessary excuse to admire it. The Gay male gaze, however, does not need this excuse, at least not in a Gay-

¹⁵⁷ Susan Hatty states that "Organized sports generally involves spectacular contests, in which fit and muscular bodies are pitted against each other. Such contact between bodies is inherently physical; however, it is often violent. [It involves] the hardening of the body into a potential instrument of harm" (Hatty 126).

friendly setting. Gay men give themselves permission to consciously look at a man's body as much more than just a competitive machine.

Nevertheless, few Gay men are raised Gay. Many men, regardless of sexual orientation, suffer from the cultural notion (notorious among White Americans) that the only appropriate time for a man to dance is when he is "three sheets to the wind" or "higher than God." Add to these insecurities the highly intimidating environment of the Circuit and it is no surprise that intoxicants play such an important role, regardless of participants' ethnic or racial background.

Alcohol, however, is usually not the intoxicant of choice in the Circuit. As people drink alcoholic beverages, they become clumsy. As one DJ friend of mine said, "You can have 2000 crackers¹⁵⁸ in the room and nobody bumps into each other. Throw in two beer drinkers and they bounce around like pinballs!"

The culture of alcohol that we have in this country encourages men to flex their "beer muscles." It allows them to feel, in folk terms, "ten feet tall and bulletproof," thus drastically lowering the threshold for acceptable violence. If the chances of accidentally bumping into other people are increased with drunkenness, and if the drunkards feel ten feet tall and bulletproof, there tends to be more social friction. Alcohol also gets in the way of skillful dancing.

¹⁵⁸ "Crackers" is shorthand for "cracked-out whores," a term of endearment for Circuit boys who use illegal drugs.

There are other substances that retard motor skills less severely than alcohol, make the imbiber feel sexy and full of energy, and do not make the user's breath stink. For these reasons, MDMA is a preferred intoxicant of Circuit participants.¹⁵⁹ The sense of communal empathy (characterized as "tribal"), internal spiritual integration, relaxation of personal space barriers, infusion of vigor, intensification of music, and sheer physical joy of dancing while doing "ecstasy" are important factors in the redefinition of masculinity in both the Circuit and Rave scenes.

Intoxicant use in the Circuit differs from the typical bar scene because the club drugs of preference in the Circuit community are not simply means for putting oneself into a stupor. All are dance-enhancing if used properly. They allow a degree of heightened social, sensual, kinesthetic, and/or cognitive awareness, all of which may be expressed through dance. This is why alcohol is not as popular as in the bar scene and why heroin is virtually unknown; both drugs tend to severely undermine one's ability to move with grace. Obsession with personal pleasure is tempered by communal identity. This balance of pleasure and propriety is crucial to experiences of cosmic transcendence on the dance floor.

¹⁵⁹ There has been a shift to crystal methamphetamine over MDMA in some circles, possibly because crystal is so readily available and easily produced. Some participants (and many DJs) complain that the prevalence of crystal has led to a more aggressive crowd.

Fierce solidarity

During the long dance sessions that typify a Circuit event, there are periods in which the DJ bonds with the crowd and unifies it, a phenomenon that I call *transcendent solidarity*. It is the breaking down of status between participants who share a state of such intense emotional affection that, as a unified *corpus*, they step outside of the everyday world together. These periods become self-validating and morally charged in their own right.

History is rewritten; everything in one's life appears to have but one purpose: to bring one to this moment, this experience of transcendent solidarity. It can happen in any number of settings with people in large numbers. A sports contest, religious revival, basic training, battlefield, and dramatic performance are common venues for transcendent solidarity. It is also the goal of most seasonal festivals and basic training for soldiers. Something like transcendent solidarity is imagined by many to be an essential feature of the state of grace awaiting us when we die and meet our loved ones in Heaven.

Transcendent solidarity in the Circuit, however, has its own distinct flavor. It is not punitive or confrontational, so it is not violent. Something different happens when a Gay man is immersed in the pulsing mass of his fellows on the

dance floor. It is not the same as the unity felt at a Pride Parade, when LGBT people show the outside world who they are. Safe within the protected zone of a Circuit party, participants may discover themselves as individual persons and as people who live in a universe that loves them, a fact that they may have missed in their upbringing. It is a *socio-somatic* discovery, one that is experienced in the context of the individual body-mind that, through close contact and synchronized movement with other people, merges into a unified *corps* or communal body-mind. Factors such as trust, rhythm, and humor are essential in the production of the Circuit's brand of transcendent solidarity. In order to differentiate the transcendent solidarity of the Circuit from that of combatants (punitive solidarity) and Ravers (PLUR solidarity), I will use an emic Circuit term that reflects assertiveness, humor, and outrageousness: *fierce solidarity*.

The socio-somatic or communal body-mind in fierce solidarity is a carnivalesque collective unity situated in a distinctly Gay male ambience that encompasses the participants without making them disappear. People behave both as individuals and as one physical mass that takes on the characteristics of a single pulsing being. This single being is often described as a *sea of men*. Within that sea, a collective self regulates the collective body. This identity determines the level of physical contact between individuals and tells participants what kinds of interactions are appropriate.

As the community bonds, people relax and drop their guards. Giving in to their collective identity, people swim with the prevailing currents, adapting behaviors appropriate for that moment. Rules for physical contact crystallize, dissolve, and reconfigure as the collective mood changes, sending ripples through the sea-crowd during the course of the evening. If the bonding is pronounced, displays of affection, smiles, and physical contact increase. But this can change very quickly; a short time later, participants may return to more conservative and guarded rules of interpersonal engagement.

Regardless of the whether the sea is calm or turbulent, a high level of trust between strangers develops and is rarely undermined--I have yet to hear of anyone having a wallet stolen at a Circuit event. Sexual desire, intoxicants, and hilarity fuel the creation of this intense and short-term corps, and public propriety keeps everyone checking with the prevailing status quo that determines just how excessive and transgressive one can be without looking foolish.

Although I contrast punitive solidarity with the fierce solidarity of the Circuit, it would be an oversimplification to call them opposites. A comparison between Circuiteers and Marines, for example, will show how similar they are in terms of social dynamics. Both groups use transgressive behavior and rhythm to bond. Both are into muscle, and both create highly homoerotic environments. Men tend to join the Marines for the same reason that they attend Circuit parties:

they want to become part of something extraordinary. We will look more closely at the interrelatedness of transgression and transcendence for soldiers, terrorists, and Circuiteers later in this work.

THE DJ

This is my church
This is where I heal my hurts
It's a natural grace
of watching young life shape
It's in minor keys
Solutions and remedies
Enemies becoming friends
when bitterness ends
This is my church
This is where I heal my hurts
For tonight
God is a DJ

“God is a DJ” by Faithless

The most important figures in the Circuit are the DJs, those legendary characters who unite the community through music. They play a pivotal role in helping bring about the fierce solidarity that shapes and certifies Circuit masculinity. In a groundbreaking study of the Gay party scene in Sydney, Australia (home of a gigantic Circuit party, Sydney Mardi Gras), Lynnette Lewis and Michael Ross state that DJs carry the highest status as sacred persons in the eyes of participants. Party promoters and drug distributors, who likewise occupy positions of power similar to that of religious leaders, are not given the same level of reverence (Lewis and Ross 146-48).

In standard American masculine discourse, one's status as a man is greatly increased by being a member of elite masculine teams, most of which are military or paramilitary in design. Men who are soldiers, police, firefighters, lifeguards, and contact sports athletes enjoy a heightened sense of masculinity because they are members of their respective teams. Each of these teams has its moments of ecstatic expression through exhibition of the *corps*, a performance in which teammates merge into one body, be it during a parade, a victory, a party, or a funeral for a fallen comrade. At these moments, each participant's identity is writ large, and if they are men, their masculine identity is confirmed by their fellows. When they are women, they may receive honorary masculine status as well.

The military/paramilitary/team sports models differ from the Circuit in substantial ways. The social mechanisms for conformity in the Circuit are more subtle. For all of the Circuit's "clone" tendencies, there is no set Circuit uniform, no chain of command, no standard for rules of engagement in the no-nonsense fulfillment of one's duty. Duty, in fact, is not an issue.

There is one striking similarity shared by the soldier and the Circuiteer. In the military, soldiers in formation listen to one voice that calls them to attention, directs them, and sings cadence for them to march together. That lone voice helps them to become one being. The equivalent in the Circuit is the DJ.

The purpose of marching is to change individuals into a united *corps*, the French word for “body.” Its unity is recognized as a socio-somatic entity called the *esprit de corps*, the spirit of the communal body. When I was in Marine Corps boot camp, my drill instructors (who sang to us as we marched) used the term *esprit de corps* for what they wanted to instill in us. Body-mind unity of the sports team (and the fans that adore them) is described as “team spirit,” remarkably close to the military’s *esprit de corps*.

I submit that team spirit of whatever team can be spiritual. The spirit of the group is evidence that we are more than just material beings. There is a sense of life after death when one belongs to a team. The individual may die, but the team lives on. These sentiments for *esprit de corps* are present in secular as well as religious institutions, and are expressed by atheists as well as true believers.

Let me make it clear that I am not *reducing* the spiritual to group solidarity. I do not subscribe to a neo-Durkheimian view that spirituality can be explained away thus. Rather, I see group solidarity, especially transcendent solidarity, as inevitably invoking, or rather, *performing* the spiritual, regardless of religious (or anti-religious) context.

Like marching soldiers, the Circuit community generates a spectacle put on by performers for performers. When they move together, Circuiteers and soldiers depend on one person to bring their bodies in sync with each other. As go

their bodies, so go their minds. It is the DJ who vicariously “sings” Circuit cadence by interweaving songs and choosing the rhythms by which the group will move.

But a DJ does more than just set the beat. The “one voice” of the DJ is composed of as many voices and instruments as songs played in the course of an evening. The crowd is not summoned by the actual voice of the DJ, who most likely will not speak directly to the crowd at all. It is the DJ’s choice of songs, a whole series of works put together by multiple artists, which transforms individuals into a pulsing group entity. When we go beyond the beat and into the music, the DJ is more like a coach than a drill sergeant. Selection of each song is a strategy, a maneuver by the DJ designed to bring out the desire for performance and help participants overcome their own collective hang-ups and anxieties. The greatest pleasures of the Circuit are only possible when the DJ coaxes the crowd into becoming a single corporate body. When asked about his role in transforming a bunch of strangers into a moving, pulsing unity. DJ Paulo said:

It’s just the magic that happens when all the elements are right; it’s hard to describe. You get a connection with the crowd and they allow you to take them “places.” A lot of DJs will tell you, “I got them in my palm.” That’s the moment when you have grabbed their attention and the crowd as a whole will allow you to take them. Having said that, it’s easy to lose them too, so you have to balance what you do when working with the dance floor (Weems. “Serious Fun” 22).

Lovers

The most popular metaphor for what DJs say they do is “sex” (“journey” is a close second). The notion that DJs would be engaged in metaphoric sonic-based sex with a group of horny Gay men is not terribly surprising, considering the context.

But a sixth of the top forty DJs are Lesbians.¹⁶⁰ In fact, I first heard the sex metaphor from DJ Susan Morabito, who stated that the sex metaphor is just that, only a metaphor. It is the best way she knows to convey the experience of DJing and connecting with the crowd. “Sex is the analogy I use because everybody can relate to it,” she said. “It’s pretty impossible for people to really relate to DJing if they have never done it.” Morabito also sees no difference between the sex and the journey metaphors. “Sex *is* a journey,” she said (Weems, “The Circuit” 190).

When we look closely at the quote by DJ Paulo, he explicitly describes DJing at its best as the moment when the crowd allows the DJ to take them places, i.e. a journey. But further down, he says that the crowd will allow the DJ to “take them,” which is a common euphemism for sex. This tacitly confirms that,

¹⁶⁰ Susan Morabito (NYC), Wendy Hunt (Ft. Lauderdale), Lydia Prim (Birmingham, AL), Kimberly S (Los Angeles), Alyson Calagna (Ft. Lauderdale), Tracy Young (NYC), and DJ Pride (Miami). All of these women are Lesbians; I cannot think of a single nationally known DJ who is a Straight woman, although three are Straight men: Victor Calderone (NYC), Chris Cox (Los Angeles), and Joe Bermudez (Boston).

as Morabito says, sex is indeed a journey, especially when it is between the DJ and the crowd.

Let us first examine the sex metaphor on its own. DJ art is all about creating the moment according to needs of the moment. Like good lovers, DJs react to the immediate desires of the beloved. Competent DJs are extremely sensitive to the temperament of the crowd and will only pre-plan an evening to a certain extent. Since the places and people change constantly, it is important for the DJs to be flexible in their program of music. What works in one city on a Friday night may not work in another city on a Saturday night. By watching and "feeling" their crowd, DJs fine-tune their selection so that it is specifically designed for that group on that date.

In order to win the crowd and then propel it into a state of communal ecstasy, the DJ must behave like a sensitive lover, gently stripping the participant of awkward self-consciousness. All of this is done without the need for words or physical contact—Circuit DJs touch participants through their musical selection. This creates a *simpatico* between the chooser of the music, the music itself, and the recipient. The greatest ecstasy for both the DJ and the dancer is when the music saturates and penetrates them both, body and soul, and they see this rapture in each other.

Nevertheless, the DJ is always dominant in the "sex act." According to DJ Ra (b. Wade Maggert), the DJ "fucks the crowd on a good night." Since the Gay masculine body can be sexually penetrated without losing its masculinity, and since the dominant partner in the sex act can be the one who is penetrated, sexual descriptions of the DJ-dancer relationship are remarkably fluid, even when the DJ is a woman or a Straight man. This, in fact, adds to the hilarity when a female DJ is told that "You worked my pussy!" by a male admirer (Weems, "The Circuit" 190).¹⁶¹

This also means that the male DJ is not always gendered as masculine. One of the biggest compliments a DJ can get is if the music (Or the DJ) is called "cunty," or if a fan looks a male DJ in the eye and screams, "WORK, BITCH!"

Sexual language in Circuit parlance reflects and amplifies the dynamics of playful sonic seduction. According to DJ Susan Morabito, a good evening begins with "foreplay," when the DJ stimulates each individual until participants make their way onto the floor. When enough of the crowd has been successfully wooed, the DJ can play a song at just the right time and trigger a rush of energy from the crowd. DJ Don Bishop calls this "tickling the prostate." Bishop listed three requirements for DJing: count to 32, drive a car (adjust the speed), and a

¹⁶¹ DJ Tracy Young remembers being informed by a young man, "You wore the strap-on (dildo), bent me over, and fucked me hard!" (personal communication, May 22, 2007)

thorough understanding of anal sex to place songs in the set that have similar qualities of a sexual orgasm. "If you are a good top or bottom," he says, "you know just when the feeling is just right. If you get this while DJing, you place your songs to build and build until you pop" (Weems, "The Circuit" 190-91).

Once the crowd reaches critical mass and most of the dancers take off their shirts, the DJ then shifts musical gears to make them "climax," typically marked by shouts, hands in the air, and smiles.¹⁶² Expressing the intensity of climax for the DJ and the dancer, DJ Joe Bermudez compares the pivotal climactic song to ejaculation (literally, "the cum shot"), an interesting choice of words for Bermudez, a Straight DJ, to use when referring to his relationship with a predominantly Gay crowd (Weems, "The Circuit" 191).¹⁶³

At the end of the set, Morabito tells us, the DJ-as-lover will ease up the intensity of the rhythms and "cuddle" with the dancers until it is time for them to leave (Weems, "The Circuit" 190-91). There has been controversy concerning the cuddling period; some DJs are afraid to let the dancers down gently for fear that

¹⁶² DJ Tracy Young calls this the "Oh shit!" moment (personal communication, May 22, 2007).

¹⁶³ Bermudez feels that the sex metaphor adroitly conveys the depth of pleasure possible for both sides in the DJ-dancer experience, adding, "When you're really fucking somebody, you don't have to ask if they're having a great time" (Weems "The Circuit" 204).

those who are not ready to come down will simply leave early. Others deem it necessary so that people are not tempted to party beyond what is good for them.

It may seem a paradox that sexual language is used to describe the DJ-participant experience, especially since the DJ is removed from the crowd and does not actually touch the participants. This use of sexual imagery can be seen as a fondness for exaggerated and hyperbolic wordplay in the community's verbal performance. But the sex metaphor need not be simply a metaphor; some DJs report feeling aroused when connecting with the crowd. In a panel discussion about the sex and the DJ, Alyson Calagna reported once having an orgasm while spinning (Qualia Conference on Gay Folklife, April 4, 2004). The sex metaphor reflects the profoundly sublime pleasure felt by the DJ and the participants, and resembles the use of sex/journey metaphors by mystics to describe their own experiences of ecstatic joy.

Guides

The journey metaphor is best understood in the context of crowd dynamics. The Circuit gathering is not just a large group. It must literally be a crowd, bodies close to each other for no other reason than the closeness, as if proximity overrides all other considerations. There should be just enough room on

the dance floor for the dancers to move or the venue will be considered too large. It is also preferable that the crowd be visible in its entirety, numerous and spatially close-knit. When seen from a few feet up, the crowd should resemble its most popular metaphor: a sea of people.

In this required closeness, the crowd takes on the characteristics of wayfarers who swim in the communal sea and travel together under the guidance of the DJ. The journey is more properly an individual and communal *quest*, which is one reason why the DJs and the community often resort to neo-shamanistic language in describing the Circuit experience. Each traveler may go through any number of adventures, defeats, and triumphs in a constantly changing milieu of interpersonal vignettes. The dance floor is an arena for any number of contests for attention. Guys will flirt, snub, and bond with others outside of their immediate circle of friends. If somebody is found to be sufficiently attractive, he may later be sent on his way as his erstwhile suitor makes a bid to "trade up" for someone even more desirable. It is a community in which relationships between strangers are in constant flux. For many individuals, a Circuit party is high drama, complete with triumphs, defeats, and glorious moments when such things as winning and losing become trivial in the lived experience of transcendent solidarity.

Since the participants in the Circuit come from a broad range of backgrounds, looks, regions, and musical tastes, it is a challenge for the DJ to

bring them together as a team. Circuiteers arrive with their own cliques, inhibitions, and prejudices. Like a shaman, the DJ utilizes specific techniques for generating ecstasy. A good DJ first generates a communal heartbeat that demands everyone's participation. As mentioned earlier, the music in a Circuit party is usually within 125-135 beats per minute, about the same rate as a human heartbeat for a brisk walk. Continuous flow is key--there are few times when it is acceptable to noticeably stop, slow down, or speed up the BPM past this narrow range. The DJ will not use speech to encourage the crowd because that would disturb the flow and displace the crowd as the center of attention. Through adroit musical selection, a good DJ progressively raises the level of excitement. The crowd exhibits its own *esprit de corps* and moves together as a team to reach the common goal of shared rapture.

DJs live for the moment when they lead the crowd through the maze of potentially devastating trials and tribulations to a "place" where all pretensions and hang-ups shatter in the shimmering ecstasy of the living communal pulse.¹⁶⁴ These moments are marked by their irresistibility and hilarity--nobody remains

¹⁶⁴ DJ Julian Marsh mentioned that the pleasure of the Circuit in its transcendence, solidarity, etc. is felt by the DJ as well as the crowd. What many people do not realize is that the journey can be every bit as intense and desirable for the DJ as it is for the dancers. To interrupt a DJ with conversation at the wrong time is to deprive the DJ of pleasure, just as if someone interrupts a person dancing with abandon (Weems, "The Circuit" 204).

outside of the shared joy — sometimes even the bartenders and party staff are dancing.

Chefs

Most DJs that I've interviewed are highly intelligent, and this creates a dilemma for them, especially if they are in demand: how can they play music, night after night, and not get insanely bored?

In order to keep up with current music, good DJs will spend hours every week going over the latest releases. Some have developed the skills to “remix” songs (digitally change the original) in the studio before presenting them to their fans. Every conscientious DJ wants to be on the cutting edge and earn the reputation for producing a special night of superb music, not just the same old thing that can be heard in every major club across the country. As DJ Paulo puts it,

I spend hours searching for new music, editing music, doing mixes, and remixing mixes to get things to sound the way I'd like them. It's all part of making my nights special. If I played what the previous weekend's DJ played, why would anyone go out? I like to give things no one else can deliver (Weems “Serious Fun” 22).

It is through individual tastes mixed with crowd expectations that DJs produce the musical ambience of an evening. The art of balancing all of these

factors has been compared to cooking by Peter Rauhofer, Alyson Calagna, and Roland Belmares. Calagna, who hails from Louisiana, has this to say about the DJ-as-chef:

Any good Cajun chef knows it takes the finest ingredients and just the right balance of spices and flavors to create a kick-ass pot of Gumbo. The same principles apply when I play my music. I choose my records delicately and specifically for the crowd, all while seasoning the sounds with my own unique flavor (personal communication, May 10, 2007).

The musical selection of the DJ-as-chef can be seasoned with different genres, ethnic influences, sound effects, samples from other songs played simultaneously, excerpts from movies or speeches, and lyrics in various languages. Belmares speaks of DJing—as-cooking in much the same language as the journey metaphor:

My recipe for a good night is like boiling a pot of water. You start it off with a nice simmer, and throughout the night you raise the temperature slowly bringing things to a boil! Then when everyone is “well done,” you bring it back down to simmer to finish things off (personal communication, May 17, 2007).

I once watched Peter Rauhofer spin for almost two hours. He used three CD players at the same time in the same song, throwing in sounds, beats, and background melodies with such precision that, had I not been watching, I would have assumed that he was only playing one pre-mixed track on one CD player. Not all Circuiteers have witnessed for themselves the skill it takes for a DJ to

coordinate so many elements (flavors as it were) in the mix within a song, not just between songs. This kind of talent is pretty much the norm for competent DJs.

Teachers

Most DJs feel the need to teach as well as entertain. Since they may spend the better part of each day searching for new music or discovering songs from the past that could enrich their repertoire, DJs often get excited when they find something that they think will really work the crowd. There is a sense of professional one-upmanship, the desire to show other DJs in attendance that whoever is in charge of the music really knows the music. There is also instant gratification when a particularly fitting song is placed adroitly into the set and the crowd roars its approval.

But the crowd does not always accept what the DJ offers. I can remember being in a club with DJ Joe Gauthreaux spinning that night. The music was wonderful, soulful, and much of it brand new. But the crowd was reluctant to dance, so the DJ put on some hard-pounding, rather mindless tunes to shake them out of their reluctance. Perversely, the crowd then hit the dance floor. When I asked Joe about it, he said, “I tried to educate them,” and acknowledged that he shifted gears because the crowd was not letting him give them quality music.

The Great Divide

What has made it even more difficult for DJs to do more than just repetitively play the same hits *ad nauseum* is a pronounced rift in musical tastes among participants. Most DJs blame the rift on excessive crystal use; one DJ compared the rise of crystal meth use in the Circuit to the Black Plague.

Since about 1999, the Circuit scene has witnessed increasing popularity of two controversial substances: GHB and crystal methamphetamine. Besides the negative impact of increased health risks due to irresponsible usage of these drugs more so than other intoxicants, there is a marked effect on musical preference with crystal meth. Popular folk wisdom divides participants into two camps: the ecstasy-ketamine “lovey” group and the crystal “bitchy” group.

The Great Divide is admirably expressed in Spring 2004 Circuit Noize:

“This music sucks, this crowd is ugly and I hate this space!”
“Hon, read your ticket. This is section E [ecstasy or MDMA]. You belong over there in section T [Tina or crystal meth].”
Oh, I thought so—way too many fucking smiles over here” (75).

Those who use MDMA and ketamine tend to favor melodic deep house music sound featuring gospel, Latino, and Afro-pop influences as well as African-Latino tribal tracks in keeping with the emotional and introspective states that are

the trademarks of X and K. The crystal people tend to respond better to not-so-subtle techno-tribal music with a strong, driving beat as well as techno-oriented remixes of screaming diva music. Beats per minute also tend to be faster for the crystal crowd, reflecting the hyper-alertness and shortened attention spans that come with 2-3 nights of no-sleep tweaking on crystal, which is the most powerful stimulant among club drugs.

Like most stereotypes, this division is oversimplified. Most people who use illegal substances will mix them up in a variety of ways. Those who use GHB will often use crystal meth to keep from “swirling out” or “falling out” (overdosing and falling into a state of unconsciousness). Both GHB and crystal are often used in conjunction with MDMA.¹⁶⁵ Plenty of MDMA-ketamine Circuiteers love techno music, and more than a few crystal lovers adore deep house. There is also no clear connection that establishes the users of one set of drugs as somehow more spiritual than another, especially since so many people in the scene utilize three or more of the four substances mentioned above at the same time.

In general, however, this division seems to hold true in terms of musical preferences. There appears to be a correlation between crystal use and faster,

¹⁶⁵ Rarely, however, is ketamine used in conjunction with GHB. Popular folk wisdom on intoxicants forbids the mixing of GHB with ketamine or alcohol.

noisier music, as if the hearing of the participants using these substances is muffled.¹⁶⁶ Ecstasy, on the other hand, enhances emotional response to music, so melody tends to be valued more so by participants who are “rolling” (on MDMA). Since about 1998, the chasm between the two camps has been growing worse every year. In 2005-6, there were signs that the rift was mending. But the healing has been slow.

This has almost put the DJ-as-teacher on the Endangered Species list. DJs are tempted to “play it safe” and give the crowd mediocre music that everyone can accept.

The phony

The Great Divide has also made things easier for the DJ poseur, a person who is not qualified in terms of mixing ability or musical sophistication, to play pre-mixed CDs for the duration of an evening¹⁶⁷ and achieve “superstar” status for

¹⁶⁶ This correlation is even more pronounced among those who balance their G with crystal.

¹⁶⁷ Pre-mixed CDs allow a person who does not have sufficient DJ skills to avoid mixing for eighty minutes at a time, thus reducing the chance of a “train wreck” (a bad segue between songs) to four times during a six-hour set. All that would be necessary for the “DJ” to do in the mean time would be to pretend to be mixing songs when one tune shifts into the next. Such antics (and I have seen them for myself) are responsible for seriously damaging the credibility of all DJs.

reasons other than professional skill. Many reputable DJs who have spent their lives giving their best to the crowd are disheartened by the pressure on them to play only mediocre music and the casual acceptance of the DJ-pretender in their midst. These things have affected the scene adversely, turning off former enthusiasts and reducing the numbers of attendees. The more cynical participants no longer consider the DJ to be anything other than a “glorified jukebox.”

Indeed, it is tough for the older DJs, the ones who learned to mix vinyl records without the help of machines that can match up the beats, to accept the dumbing-down and degradation of their craft by a no-talent phony. The step from vinyl to CD made it possible for a lazy DJ to let a pre-programmed CD spin for eighty minutes at a time, thus taking the DJ out of the moment and undermining the crucial connection between the DJ, the music, and the dancers. Current technologies undermine that connection even further; there is now a move from CDs to computer laptops, which hold all the tunes necessary for a set in their hard-drives. The unscrupulous DJ can now pre-program an entire 10-hour set on a laptop. Until standards for DJing are codified, universally accepted, and regularly enforced by promoters, we can expect more disillusionment from participants, especially when the premium placed on muscle becomes more important than talent in determining which DJ gets a gig.

The problems arising from “playing it safe” and the *faux* DJ are not immediate; it is a cumulative effect that impacts most strongly on the minority of participants who really know the music. In any Circuit crowd, there are a significant number of participants who are simply there to get high and have sex. Others enjoy the “gathering of the tribe” and take pleasure being around so many Gay men dancing in one place, but may not be concerned too much about what songs are played. But the core group, the Circuit *aficionados* as it were, is that minority composed of those who know music, along with those who are not so informed but are moved by quality music of any genre. This combined group is an extremely influential subset that is quite critical of what is sent their way. They also tend to be the professional DJ’s best friends on the dance floor because, when the DJ puts on something different that is particularly danceable, they will be the first to respond to it with enthusiasm. Others, more concerned with who is watching them, when their buzz will kick in, or with whom they want to score, may not have the confidence to hit the dance floor with something they have not yet heard on the radio or their local bar.

The temptation to sacrifice the quality of performance is tough to resist, considering the mindless vindictive reaction of those on either side of the

drug/music divide¹⁶⁸ and a sometimes exhausting schedule that can take a renowned DJ from coast to coast and back again on a big weekend. Talented DJs with a strong sense of integrity strive, in the words of DJ Wendy Hunt, to “always be honest and always be grateful” (personal communication, May 23, 2007). Most DJs do their jobs very well and resist the temptation to “play it safe.” They give the crowd their best, and live for the moments when they and the crowd become one.

¹⁶⁸ Many DJs refuse to read comments about them on the various Circuit list serves precisely because of the spite that some participants express in their reviews of DJ performances.

CHAPTER 10

THE GIRLFRIENDS

We have to experience drugs. We have to do *good* drugs, which can produce very intense pleasure. I think this puritanism about drugs, which implies that you can either be for drugs or against drugs, is mistaken. Drugs have now become a part of our culture. Just as there is bad music and good music, there are bad drugs and good drugs. So we can't say we are "against" drugs any more than we can say that we are "against" music.

Michel Foucault, *Foucault Live* 384

Morality in the Gay male community is different from its Straight counterpart in that there is much less stigma attached to sex and drugs. Within the Circuit community, drugs are not bad per sé, although certain ones are considered bad. For example, drugs that are injected through a hypodermic needle (except steroids) are considered unattractive and low-class.

In the early days of the Manhattan/fire Island Circuit, the Gay male party scene underwent a serious shift that reflected the new confidence and raw sexuality of proud Gay men, a strong sense of self-worth, and an obsession with muscle that fostered body fascism. It was also the dawning of the age of club drugs.

If anything, the attitude towards club drugs in the Circuit community fosters an elitist identity based on shared outlaw status and substance-savvy sophistication. The prevalence of drugs in the Circuit scene does not include a corresponding increase in violent crime that one might expect to accompany a clandestine market for banned substances. Few people involved in the distribution system identify as "drug dealers" — they consider themselves to be friends who help out other friends. Instead of viewing drug distributors as shadowy, dangerous figures, members of the Circuit community usually hold them in high regard.

Lewis and Ross state:

The drug dealers were also significant persons for dance party patrons. They were responsible for the dispensing of conscious-changing substances, caretakers and healers if necessary, a role similar to that of a shaman or some contemporary medical practitioners (Lewis and Ross 148).

Unlike popular perceptions of drug use as a social problem that should be stigmatized and even criminalized, the Circuit community recognizes that certain substances are useful tools for increasing sensual pleasure, dance intensity, self-esteem, tolerance of others, and psychic rapport with the universe. It is no surprise, then, that those who help in the distribution of those substances are often seen as valued members of the community. They act as counselors and, when necessary, "babysitters" for those who experience problems with their altered states.

A strong distaste for violence and reluctance to draw the attention of the police are two tendencies that have been in the Gay male community for a very long time. There is usually a high level of cooperation between users and distributors (and between distributors) that dramatically lowers the need for violent “turf wars.” This in turn reduces the visibility of the drug trade and the need for police intervention in community affairs.

Like haircuts, interior design color schemes, and boy bands, Gay men's preferences concerning intoxicating substances have shifted over the years. The darlings of the 1970s were marijuana, Quaaludes and angel dust (PCP). They were replaced in the '80s by cocaine and MDMA. Since the '90s, four drugs have been consistently in demand. In Circuit folk speech, these four substances are known as “the girlfriends” and have been given “girl names”: Stacy (MDMA), Katie (ketamine), Gina (GHB) and Tina (crystal methamphetamine).¹⁶⁹

Drugs tend to generate cultural norms for users that differ according to substance. Rules for drinking alcohol, for example, are not the same for the rules for smoking pot. This is due in part to the legal status of the drug in question. But legal status is but one factor. The effects of the drug and how it is ingested as well as the economic, ethnic, and age-related status of the users can result in significant differences in drug culture.

¹⁶⁹ These names may change, depending on geography. I have given the names that I have heard most often.

One reason why alcohol, marijuana, heroin, and LSD are not especially popular Circuit drugs is because they do not meet at least three of six important criteria:

- 1) The drug should enable the user to be more social.
- 2) It should not make the user too clumsy.
- 3) It should make the user feel sexy.
- 4) It should help the user stay awake.
- 5) It should enhance the music.
- 6) The user should feel a fun sense of delirium.

In truth, not one of the four girlfriends fulfills all six of these criteria all the time. This is one reason why participants often use more than one girl simultaneously.

Although there are plenty of other illegal substances available, such as LSD, marijuana, and cocaine, the four girlfriends are the most popular club drugs for Gay men today. Let us take a closer look at these *femmes fatales*.

Stacy

Patented in 1912 by the Merck Corporation, MDMA (MethyleneDioxyMethAmphetamine) was initially marketed as a diet pill. Rumor

has it that German soldiers had been given MDMA to offset hunger during World War I (Reynolds 81). Perhaps this was the reason for the stories of soldiers on both sides dropping their weapons and having soccer matches, card games and sing-alongs, all against the orders of their superiors, during the 1914 Christmas Truce (Weintraub 75-120). With all that love going on, we can only imagine what went on in the trenches.

Ecstasy has long been renowned as a therapeutic drug. Users report that MDMA helps them to drop their guard and open up to others. Psychiatrists have been asking the federal government for years to allow MDMA for victims of severe trauma, and in 2003, some researchers were allowed to administer MDMA to women suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and to help terminal cancer patients deal with anxiety (Nutt et al 180, Barile 161).

The federal government, however, has been dead set against MDMA for years, therapeutic or otherwise. Ecstasy was declared illegal for any use, even medical, in 1986. Linking the drug to Raves and the corruption of American youth, government-sponsored studies have demonstrated that even one dose of MDMA irrevocably damages the brain. These studies have been the basis for congressional action, a topic on the Oprah Winfrey Show, and an episode of *Touched by an Angel*.

On September 28, 2001, Oprah Winfrey showed brain scans of ecstasy users with prominent holes in their brains. She warned parents to watch out for certain tell-tale signs of drug abuse from their children, such as bright-colored clothing, expressions of love and affection, and parties in which their kids swear that they will not be drinking.¹⁷⁰

On November 24 of the same year, *Touched by an Angel* ran Episode 810, “Heaven’s Portal.” Grace, an angel (played by Valerie Bertinelli) sent to help a troubled teenager, takes a hit of ecstasy at a Rave and freaks out, proving that MDMA not only damages human minds but angelic ones as well (Weems, “Girl Trouble” 4).

In September of 2002, the NIH and the National Institute on Drug Abuse published a report claiming that a moderate dose of ecstasy killed laboratory animals. Congress then passed legislation designed to snuff the Rave scene. In September of 2003, however, the NIH issued a retraction of the 2002 report. Apparently, the drug that killed the test animals was not MDMA (Doblin 220).

NIH-sponsored brain scans showing permanent damage caused by one dose of MDMA to “virgin” brains were equally inaccurate. The scans had been taken from patients who were not, it turns out, MDMA virgins. The average test

¹⁷⁰ On December 19, 2006, I went to www.oprah.com and found the same information that was broadcasted on the Sept. 2001 show.
http://www.oprah.com/tows/pastshows/tows_past_20010928.jhtml

subject had taken ecstasy more than 200 times before the “virgin” pictures of healthy brains had been taken. In addition, the brain scans used in Oprah’s exposé had been doctored—the holes were not actually there (Doblin 222). Nevertheless, the NIH and our government will not let lack of evidence keep them from telling us the truth.

There have been however, deaths attributed to overheating and dehydration while on MDMA. On the other side of the coin, ecstasy may also alleviate some of the agonizing pain suffered by those with Parkinson’s disease (Doblin 221).

MDMA is usually taken orally, quickly accompanied by swigs of water to wash away its rather nasty flavor. Some people snort it in powder form (“doing a bump”). It may also be shoved up one’s ass (“booty bump”). Not surprisingly, this can cause cramps and diarrhea.

In the harsh world of Gay nightlife, most people need something to make them feel more at ease among the myriad bitter queens, sleazy trolls (men who cannot keep their hands to themselves), and arrogant body fascists that they face whenever they go out and about. Stacy helps some users lower their guards, communicate effectively, and bond with perfect strangers. She may also bring close friends and lovers even closer.

“Rolling” (getting high on ecstasy) can make users feel incredibly sensual. Music may sound better, sight and color appear more intense, and dancing can become an incredible sensual experience.

What goes up, however, must come down. After an incredible weekend of bonding with comrades and falling in love a dozen times (with one’s own boyfriend, even!), the inevitable return to the real world can be harsh. Since MDMA is a stimulant, users may stay up too late and not eat enough, running themselves ragged. Be prepared for “Terrible Tuesday”, with bouts of depression and irritability. “I love you, man!” is replaced with “Fuck off and die!”

Some Gay men approach ecstasy the same way they do alcohol: the more one does, the more fierce one is. These folks are candidates for the hospital ward when their blood pressure shoots sky high, their bodies overheat, and they become dangerously dehydrated. Or, conversely, they may drink too *much* water.

As with almost all drugs, legal and illegal, there is a law of diminishing returns. Constant use over a sustained period of time will render the drug less and less effective. Two things that do not diminish, however, are the tendency for users’ eyes to bulge and their teeth to grind. One Circuiteer told me that he has chipped his teeth more than once due to chattering while under the influence (Weems, “Girl Trouble” 5). A piece of gum may seem like manna from Heaven.

Ecstasy's status as a banned substance means that there is no quality control. Most pills are cut with any number of questionable substances, including heroin, Robitussin, and MDMA analogs that produce all of its bad effects without any of the good ones. Occasionally, a batch of dangerous pills hits the market.

MDMA can also bring on sexual dysfunction, cause diarrhea, and take away the ability to pee.

Katie

Like MDMA, ketamine hydrochloride is the baby of a big drug company (Parke Davis). It was first synthesized in 1962 and used recreationally in the mid-1960s. During the Vietnam War, ketamine was used as an anesthetic, but was discontinued because of its tendency to cause disturbing out-of-body experiences (Sanders 77-78). Current research indicates that ketamine may also have anti-depressant properties (Licinio 806).

Ketamine (also known as "K") hit the Gay party scene in the 1970s, but did not raise the hackles of the government until the late 1990s. Its rising popularity over the last few years has brought it into the public eye and triggered a fair amount of public hysteria. Since the government has linked club drugs to Al

Qaeda, date rape (Krebs 99), and teenage deaths, distribution of ketamine has been markedly reduced in the interest of public safety and national security.

Unlike MDMA, ketamine is not considered too dangerous for regular medical treatments, especially for veterinarians. It is usually produced in liquid form for intravenous use, primarily as an animal tranquilizer. Studies have shown its potential in small doses for helping people deal with chronic pain.

Most recreational users will bake the liquid and pulverize the brittle white residue into powder (Sanders 78-80). This has led the government to encourage the production of non-bake-able ketamine, which, when thrown in the oven, turns into a smoldering sludge.

At some point in their ketamine experiences, most users will go into what is called a “K-hole,” a stupor in which they have trouble speaking, move in slow motion, and are extremely befuddled. A K-hole differs from the state of drunkenness in three ways: its duration is usually much shorter (about 20-45 minutes), the user (if conscious) is quite aware of being incapacitated, and, like MDMA, it does not foster aggressive behavior.

It is not uncommon to see K users blow their noses and expel small chunks of white, powdery mucus. I heard a fan of Ketamine examine the boogers in his Kleenex and exclaim, “There goes rent!” (Weems, “Girl Trouble” 5)

Katie is a “dissociative anesthetic,” that is, she causes the user to become connected and disconnected with the body, psyche, and senses in novel ways. She may enhance music, clarify thinking, and send the user into entertaining (or distressing) inner journeys.

Katie may affect vision in interesting, if not alarming, ways, such as narrowing one’s sight to a very narrow field, imposing patterns on incoming light, or even giving air a jellied texture. In one urban legend about ketamine, a young man had bumped himself into a state in which he could not see. He discovered, however, that when he spoke out loud, his sight returned. When he was silent, he had to stand still because he was blind. In order to move about, he had to utter a constant stream of words. This was highly amusing to him, and he began racing around the room, naming everything in sight as he went: “Lamp, couch, floor-floor-floor, dog, wall,” etc.¹⁷¹

Of the four girls, Katie is seen as the least dangerous and is often used as a form of self-medication, not unlike a kind of aspirin for those who like to party. “Terrible Tuesdays” are not associated with her.

For many people in the party scene, Katie and Stacy are their favorite party girls. The combination of the two is very popular, especially with those who are music *aficionados*. Sometimes partygoers will concoct a batch of “trail mix,”

¹⁷¹ Although I cannot validate the facticity of this particular folktale, I do not consider it to be outside the realm of possibility.

powder made of K and ecstasy (along with other drugs, such as Viagra and crystal meth).

Inner journeys can bring users to hell as well as paradise. Some people report that their minds would wander out of their bodies, a frightening feeling that reminded them of death. Those who do too much ketamine over long periods of time may suffer from excruciatingly painful stomach cramps and require hospitalization. Ketamine's physiological effects may also include increased blood pressure, insomnia, and occasional sexual dysfunction.

Users may experience extreme mood swings and a strong sense of paranoia. They may panic and withdraw from everyone, trapped in a pervasive sense of impending doom. On the other extreme, they may talk incessantly and drive everybody crazy. Short-term memory may be impaired for the duration of the buzz. The law of diminishing returns applies to ketamine as well as MDMA: the more one does, the more one has to do.

Gina

GHB (Gamma HydroxyButyrate) is a clear, oily liquid that depresses the central nervous system, removes furniture varnish, and ruins linoleum countertops. It was synthesized in the mid-1970s and sold as a sleep aid (Frances

et al 171). GHB was sold to weightlifters as a bodybuilding supplement (Kuhn et al 200).

In 1990, the number of emergency room visits for respiratory failure, seizures, and comas triggered by G led the Food and Drug Administration to ban her (Frances 172), but the girl had just gotten started. Until 2001, emergency room visits attributed to G overdose have risen every year since 1994 (Goldberg 196).

GHB is usually taken with a non-alcoholic drink. Any number of factors can lead to an overdose, such as not enough food before partying, improper timing between doses, and misjudging drug strength. Tight groups of friends watch out for each other and provide support when one of their number “falls out” (goes comatose or into a seizure).

Why is it that a depressant can cause men to dance in a frenzy, chat away at full speed, and get sexually aroused? The answer lies somewhere in the intricacy of the human psychoneural network. If we think of the mind as a series of off/on switches, any basic emotion or behavior is the result of a whole series of systems being either dampened or stimulated in concert with each other. Certain systems can be stimulated, paradoxically enough, by dampening those safeguards that keep them in check. With alcohol, for example, the internal barriers that keep

people from expressing themselves can be put to sleep, as it were, and they may end up acting and speaking without caution and (apparently) full of energy.

With GHB, the rational guard established over physical desires is tranquilized. If done just right, the user feels free, sexy, and full of life. There is, however, only a narrow window in which this benign and pleasurable state can be achieved without going overboard. It is much easier to overdose on GHB than any other club drug. Lack of regulation in its production only compounds the problem.

A bit too much G, and too many regulating systems shut down at once. The user may run around like a madman, a sure sign that, if he stands still, he will go into convulsions. While desperately trying to stay awake, he will fade in and out of consciousness, often unaware that he is only partially coherent.¹⁷²

GHB, however, is not without its medical uses. It is currently approved for the treatment of narcolepsy under the brand name Xyrem (Kuhn 200).

GBL (Gamma-Butyrolactone) and BD (ButaneDiol) are chemical analogs to GHB that create the same effects of euphoria, horniness, and occasional physical trauma (Cupp and Tracy 173). On the street, they are usually labeled “GHB.” BD is considered by some to be the safest form of those chemicals sold as G (and GBL the worst form). I have found no publicly available research to confirm or deny the claim.

¹⁷² I have not seen women “fall out,” possibly because women may not be so quick to take a substance that can so easily render them helpless.

The ban on GHB and its analogs has been ineffective because of their many industrial uses and the comparative ease in which they may be acquired. A couple of years ago, it was convenient and inexpensive to order GHB analogs over the internet. But in 2002, the government set up a nationwide sting operation, shutting down most of the online business in a couple of months and arresting people all over the country.

Although there are occasional droughts, Gina seems to be available most of the time. Of all the girls, Gina is usually the easiest to score. She is also a cheap date. G may generate the same kinds of sensual pleasures as MDMA, but without the teeth-grinding. Unlike ecstasy, G does not usually prevent erections.

Government crackdowns on Stacie and Katie have inspired many party people to turn to Gina. Others prefer it to ecstasy because recovery from a night with Gina is fairly painless. Unlike ketamine, G rarely sends the user into a state of deep introspection. It is much more about the body than the mind.

G overdoses have resulted in the closing of dance clubs on both coasts. Promoters and club owners have been put into an excruciating bind: if they kick out people who fall out, they may lose the crowd. If they call an ambulance, city officials may use this as an excuse to shut them down. By 2000, it had gotten to the point that, as a rule, participants would not take a swig from a proffered water bottle without first asking if it's "just water."

Problems with Gina became so serious a few years ago that promoters and club owners, normally a rather cantankerous lot, banded together with DJs in common cause to discuss solutions. The best strategy yet has been to invite the MedEvent team of volunteer health workers to watch over the crowd during a party, and treat overdoses on the spot, referring only the most serious cases for hospitalization.

GHB (a.k.a. “Girl Hardly Breathing”) overdose is not a pretty sight. Victims vomit, go into seizures, and may become comatose. If enough is taken, the result can be respiratory failure and cardiac arrest.

The biggest problems with G are that 1) most everyone who takes it will have at least one seizure due to carelessness. 2) In most cases, victims sleep off an overdose, but occasionally they die in their sleep. 3) Too often, victims may have no memory of seizures or vomiting. An incident that has been repeated all too often (my sources indicate that it has occurred a number of times in several cities) describes an acquaintance who “fell out” on GHB, was put into an ambulance, taken to a hospital, and had his stomach pumped. Three hours later, he then showed up at an after-party, laughing about his experience and dosing up on more G. Sometimes the story ends with his death (Weems, “Girl Trouble” 8).

Gina can inspire boys and girls to do all kinds of unsavory things they would not normally do in public, such as bite people, flail around on the floor,

moan aloud, drool, hit themselves, and make horrible faces, all the while completely unaware of what they are doing. Guys on G tend to sweat like pigs. The drug has an obnoxious taste and can burn throat tissue. It can be addictive. On the other hand, G is quickly metabolized in the body without leaving a trace, at least nothing that current drug tests are tailored to pick up.

Tina

Crystal methamphetamine, a stimulant that affects the central nervous system, is a form of methamphetamine that looks like tiny shards of broken glass. Methamphetamine was first made in Japan in 1919 and used by soldiers and pilots for both Axis and Allied nations as a go-pill. Unlike MDMA, meth tends to bring out aggression, making it an optimal choice for as a combat enhancer. The first recorded incidence of large-scale meth abuse occurred in Japan after World War II, when military stockpiles became available to the public. US military use of the drug was so prevalent that, in 1966, the Pentagon purchased over eighty million ten-milligram doses (Osborne 53-55). It would not be a stretch of the imagination to assert that meth addiction in the US began with, and was unwittingly encouraged by, the Armed Forces.

Methamphetamine became popular outside of the military in 1950s America. Truck drivers and students used it to stay awake and improve performance. Soon, however, it was linked to sexual deviance. Investigations into drug trafficking noted a conspicuous connection between amphetamine use and homosexuals. This connection included the use of meth by homosexuals in order to increase sexual libido, much as crystal meth is used today by Gay males (Osborne 56-59).

In 1965 and in 1970, the government clamped down on all amphetamine production and distribution. This created a lull in illegal meth use, but cocaine soon took over in its place during the 1970s and '80s (Osborne 56). The military, however, continued to give amphetamines to some of its personnel, but not as much as they had before 1970. Still, Gulf War pilots used it in 1991 (Osborne 55).

Tina came roaring back for civilians in the 1980s with the rise of small-scale producers who used easily accessible ingredients. Underground motorcycle gangs supposedly took her all over the nation. Crystal use in the Gay community rose sharply in the last few years when Gay men discovered once more that they could have mad sex for hours on it. There is now a pervasive network of internet sites, bathhouses, and dealers that cater those who want to engage in "Party 'n Play" (PNP). Although PNP may refer to the recreational use of any drugs with sex, it is mostly a code for crystal-fueled sex.

Alarmed by the rise in crystal meth addicts, the government has cracked down on the distribution of the common substances used for crystal production, with some success. It is not an easy task, however, since many “meth houses” are out in the middle of rural nowhere, or are across the border in Mexico where clandestine meth factories produce it in bulk. The pervasiveness of the illegal drug trade in some parts of Mexico is so pronounced that they have their own folksong genre, the *narcocorrido*, which includes in its stock of outlaw-heroes the *cristalero*, crystal meth trafficker (Wald 52, 266).

Like GHB and ketamine, methamphetamine has limited medical applications, such as treating narcolepsy, obesity, and attention deficiency disorder. A collaborator once showed me some blue pills that had been prescribed for his ADD. “These are real methamphetamine,” he announced proudly. “Want one?” (Weems, “Girl Trouble” 8)

The most popular means for ingesting crystal meth are snorting and smoking. Another paradox of the human neural system is that smoking “ice” or “glass” (uncrushed crystals) can bring about a sense of deep calm.

Party boy after party boy has told me that Tina works, and that is why it is so difficult to manage. You want to stay at a kick-ass party, even though you haven’t slept in 48 hours? Tina is there for you. You have a deadline that cannot

be pushed back? Tina lifts you up. Shy? Tina will make you fierce (Weems, “Girl Trouble” 8).

With the rise of internet sex, boys into Party ‘n Play no longer need to go to a party or even a bar. They can order sex online, just like pizza. Even more amazing are the reports of insanely long sexual marathons with Tina. It is not unusual to hear stories of non-stop wrangling for eight, twelve, even twenty hours from both men and women. Studies done on the recent epidemic of syphilis and increase in HIV seroconversion indicate that a contributing factor is crystal sex.

Some boys balance their Gina with Tina. A common folk antidote to a G fall-out is a bump of T, and Tina has been described by Gina lovers as “The girl who keeps us all out of trouble” (Weems, “Girl Trouble” 8).

The law of diminishing returns is even more distressingly apparent with crystal than with any other club drug. In addition, there is strong neurological evidence that methamphetamine may deaden the capacity for pleasure and joy when sober. The addict can only feel alive when high. Even worse, extreme bouts of depression and despair may accompany sobriety as well. These bouts can only be alleviated by doing another bump, smoking more ice, or going into rehab.

Here is a Tina addiction story that typifies what I have heard over the course of five years or so. A Gay man was successful in the business world but unhappy in his personal life. He grew up in a fundamentalist Christian household,

but became disenchanted with religion as he struggled with his sexual identity. A bit overweight, he began to use crystal because he felt awkward in social circles. In no time, he lost weight, got on steroids, and became sexually active with hot men who never gave him a second look before he started “tweeking” (using recreational drugs, but often associated specifically with using crystal meth).

He went on binges of sexual excess that would go from Friday to Monday, sometimes even longer. Constant, frequent usage made him utterly dependent on crystal, which he labels to this day as “That bitch Tina.”¹⁷³ He became increasingly paranoid, lost his job, lost everything.

Unlike other less fortunate addicts, he did not seroconvert. He struggled to stay off crystal, failing more times than he could count. One day, his mother came to see him in rehab. “Mom, I’m going to stay clean,” he promised. “I think I’ll find me a nice girl and get right with God.”

Realizing that she had almost lost her son, his Born-Again mother looked at him and said, “You stay true to yourself.” This was the moment when he found the strength to finally overcome his addiction (Weems, “Girl Trouble” 8).

¹⁷³ It is commonplace for addicts and counselors alike to speak of crystal meth as if it were a person. I personally find such anthropomorphism disturbing. Personification leads to demonization, which in turn implies that the addict has no agency. The drug can be blamed for everything. Without some form of personal accountability expected from the addict, recovery is well-nigh impossible.

CHAPTER 11

HARM REDUCTION

What is there that is not poison?
All things are poison and there is nothing that is not poison.
Solely the dose determines that a thing is not a poison.

Paracelsus (1493-1541)¹⁷⁴

In response to the excessive and self-destructive behavior of too many Circuiteers, there has been a strong movement within the community for *harm reduction*, strategies and programs to reduce health risks associated with intoxication and unsafe sex in the Circuit community.

The basic principles of harm reduction are as follows:

- 1) Drug addiction should be treated as an illness, not a crime.
- 2) Attempts to ban recreational drugs and unsafe sex are counterproductive.

¹⁷⁴ Paracelsus (a.k.a. Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim) was a Medieval alchemist-physician who recognized that 1) poisons should be understood in chemical, not supernatural, terms, and 2) dosage, not substance, makes a poison. His recognition and promotion of these two principles mark him as a figure of importance in the history of toxicology (Lutz 82, Fenton 5).

- 3) Campaigns the use shame to prevent drug use or unsafe sexual practices are counterproductive.
- 4) Education is the most effective means for reducing overdoses, addiction, and STDs.
- 5) The most effective educational programs go directly to the community at risk, using strategies that appeal to its members.

Harm reduction in the Circuit is a coordinated effort. Artists and media experts have designed advertisements and brochures aimed at Circuiteers.

MedEvent, a volunteer group of doctors, nurses, paramedics, and EMTs from all across the country, goes to Circuit parties and helps people with health issues. A continuous dialogue has been set up with event promoters and venue owners to address harm reduction issues and strategies. There is even a list serve for professionals (partysafe@yahoogroups.com) to discuss issues pertaining to harm reduction.

MedEvent

Founded in 1998 by Dr. Chris Mann from Dallas, Texas, MedEvent is a welcome presence on the dance floor. Equipped with folding lounge chairs, a

sizeable medical kit, and an oxygen tank, the MedEvent staff sets up a “recovery room” near the dance floor but apart from the gaze of the curious.

The volunteers are easy to spot; they wear red shirts with the MedEvent logo. Dr. Mann described the symbols in the uniform:

The design of the shirts is deliberate in a couple of ways: 1) white on red or vice/versa stands out even in a dark place for easy sighting. 2) The symbols used are a Swiss Cross (international medical symbol) centered inside an upside-down triangle that is easily recognized by Gays as a symbol of homosexuality, but not often by heterosexuals, in order to communicate the origin and intent of the medical group.¹⁷⁵

MedEvent staff members stand discreetly at the edge of the dance floor, ready to help anyone who looks as if there might be a health problem.

MedEvent volunteers are familiar with the Circuit scene. Many of them are themselves Circuiteers, and may be seen off-duty at other events. Their familiarity with the scene includes medical knowledge based on lived experience about how to handle crises that are fairly unique to the Circuit scene. These medical professionals have protocols for treatment that are much more effective and safe than local EMS teams.

It is impossible to determine how many lives MedEvent has saved; prior to MedEvent, the Circuit was well on its way to self-destruction. A significant number of participants consistently behaved irresponsibly, especially with GHB

¹⁷⁵ Personal communication, 2 June 2005.

and its comatose- and death-inducing properties. Occasionally, shortsighted party promoters would dump unconscious clientele out on the street in order to avoid calling ambulances.

The MedEvent crew changed the scene by putting the focus on compassion. Their discreet and nonjudgmental presence acts as a gentle reminder to both promoters and participants that there is more to the party than making a profit and getting cracked.

Dr. Mann is pleased with his organization. “The intended impact of MedEvent on the dance community has been achieved,” he said. “Most patrons now look after each other, even strangers, much more [than previously] and are not afraid to give and seek help from us to keep the whole environment safer and more positive for us all.”¹⁷⁶

Social Factors

Along with concerns about how participants behave, harm reduction proponents see tolerance from police officers and city officials as crucial to the health and wellbeing of participants. The elimination of draconian law enforcement practices in the dance scene, coupled with promoters that give the

¹⁷⁶ Personal communication, 2 June 2005. Mann is retiring as director of MedEvent in August 2007.

community a good party in nice settings, appears to lower stress caused by shame and fear. Consequently, problems with substance abuse likewise tend to be reduced. Many harm reduction advocates have also made common cause with the Drug Policy Alliance, an umbrella organization dedicated to the decriminalization of recreational drugs.

Some cities go out of their way making participants feel at home, with official welcome events and banners promoting the events on the streets. Montreal promotes its Black and Blue Ball as a citywide event in early October for Canadian Thanksgiving weekend, Palm Springs welcomes White Party attendees with open arms every Latin Easter, and South Beach in Miami does the same in early March for the Winter Party and US Thanksgiving weekend for its own White Party. Official municipal-wide appreciation of Circuit events is a public expression of tolerance for Gay people and is also recognition of the revenue brought into the city every year. Compared to other large gatherings, such as sports events or musical concerts, Circuit participants are much easier to manage, in no small part due to the lack of violence and minimal destruction of property. Municipal recognition also subtly places Circuiteers on notice that they are representatives of Gay culture, and that they should behave appropriately, at least when in public. This includes moderation in the use of intoxicants.

One notable trend in the US, however, has been the reduction of awareness-oriented advertisements and material at the events. The Philadelphia Blue Ball 2005 had a complete absence of any guides describing the properties of party drugs and how to party safely. This is a significant change from Blue Ball 2000 in which posters were hung throughout the venue and on bathroom stalls, cautioning participants about the effects of certain substances. The reason for this silence is due to the commonly held American notion that there is no such thing as responsible drug use. Since the US intensified its war on drugs, messages that openly advocate harm reduction rather than complete abstinence are basically seen as giving aid and comfort to the enemy. Canadian sensibilities on this point, however, are quite different. Ad campaigns for harm reduction and responsible drug use have been conducted since the '90s and still go on today in Canadian cities like Toronto and Montreal.

Black and Blue in Montreal has been at the forefront of harm reduction and a kinder, gentler Circuit. The Bad Boys Club-Montreal (BBCM) that runs Black and Blue and other annual parties (Hot and Dry, Red Party, Bal des Boys, and Twist) coined the phrase “The Party Needs You” (in both English and French, of course: “Pour que le party soit réussi, on a besoin de toi!”) for their

commitment to make every attendee feel welcome.¹⁷⁷ At the same time, personal responsibility is also highlighted, and the underlying message is this: “The party needs you, so don’t endanger your own health or ruin things for the rest of us by behaving irresponsibly.” Information is readily available about the effects of recreational drugs and possible complications that could result when they are mixed with HIV medications. Toronto’s ACT (AIDS Committee of Toronto) likewise is proactive in providing information about drug use and harm reduction for Circuit events and held in that city.

¹⁷⁷ I attended Black and Blue 2006. The Bad Boys Club-Montreal, the organization that is in charge of B&B, has a strong commitment to harm reduction. Posters and pamphlets designed to educate participants about club drugs are placed throughout different venues used for that weekend.

PART IV THE SOUL

CHAPTER 12

STEPPING OUT: THE CIRCUIT AS ECSTATIC RITUAL

Everything will be perfect
Tonight and forever
Light shine off, light shine on
Making our faces many colors
Everybody's moving
Like waves make an ocean, on and on
Everybody's singing, yeah
This is happiness happening

“Happiness Happening” by Lost Witness

Several meanings are associated with the word “ecstasy.” The *American Heritage College Dictionary* defines it as “1. Intense joy or delight. 2. A state of emotion so intense that one is carried beyond rational thought and self-control: *an ecstasy of rage*. 3. The trance, frenzy, or rapture associated with mystic or prophetic exaltation” (*American Heritage College Dictionary* 435). It also refers to MDMA, a recreational drug that is favored by Ravers and Circuiteers.

Exstasis, the Latin root of the word, means “terror.” We can go back further to its Greek root, *ekstasis*, which means “astonishment, distraction.” The actual word-blocks that make it up are *ex* (“out of”) and *stasis* (“standstill,”

American Heritage College Dictionary 1327). In other words, ecstasy signifies a dramatic shift from static to dynamic. It implies action, movement out of place, going outside of oneself in a state of emotional agitation (as in “I was beside myself with happiness”), stepping out of the ordinary.

Ecstasy is the common experiential link for those who wish to push things outside of their normal boxes, including themselves. Although most societies allow some form of ecstatic expression, unregulated ecstasy is considered excessive and may lead to socially transgressive behavior, so it is closely policed to ensure that chaos does not spill out and undermine the institutions that guarantee stability and safety. But there are always outlaws, people stepping out of line, who live for ecstatic experiences not regulated by licensed institutions. This includes groups of men who perform their masculinity in ways that their respective societies find problematic, such as terrorists and Circuiteers.

In order to better understand the nonviolent spiritual masculinity of Circuiteers, we will compare it with the *esprit de corps* of soldiers and the holy bond that unites terrorists. We will examine techniques of ecstasy as means for producing both terror and joy in the ways each group ritually performs *communitas*, the social glue that binds people together in solidarity, within their own theatrical frames.

Fierce solidarity

Circuit folk spirituality involves the secular performance of ecstatic communal dance.¹⁷⁸ In this context, "ecstasy" may be defined as transcendent solidarity, my term for a core socio-somatic experience that unites large numbers of individuals into one body-mind. Transcendent solidarity occurs in the circuit when the DJ bonds with the crowd. As mentioned earlier, I call this particular phenomenon "fierce solidarity" to include an emic term (fierce) in a playful manner that reflects the affinity for humor and the premium placed on self-affirmation in the circuit community. Because the Circuit community resists religious codification in the framing and execution of fierce solidarity, participants are free to interpret their experiences as ecstatic beings according to the cosmology of their choice, or no cosmology at all.

¹⁷⁸ As a scholar of religion and folklore, I see the Circuit as possessing its own "folk spirituality" as an ecstatic practice without, as Barbara Walker Lloyd puts it, an "institutionally sanctioned and codified doctrine" (Walker 6). I use, as David Hufford would say, "experience based theory" (Hufford, "Beings Without Bodies" 11) on the premise that the lived experience of the Circuit is valid and worthy of study. It is not, however, what Hufford would call a "spiritual belief" because there is no prerequisite that one believe in non-corporeal spirits (15). This is a point where he and I differ.

This understanding of Circuit spirituality undermines the distinction between the secular and the spiritual, and I mean for it to do so. A remarkable amount of spiritual expression in America is now done in secular settings, including homespun memorials such as small roadside shrines for traffic accident victims and a massive impromptu memorial of letters, flowers, candles, and memorabilia, such as the one at the former site of the World Trade Center Towers, which I find particularly instructive. The World Trade Center shrine was a spatial frame that allowed for religious and nonreligious forms of remembrance; atheists were just as free to post their grief as anyone else. I refer to "secular spirituality"¹⁷⁹ to encompass the dizzying array of new spiritual folkways in which there is an ethic of inclusion and tolerance for framing both religious and nonreligious expression together. Circuit spirituality is one of those folkways. Secular spirituality can act as a bridge between the cosmic spirituality of religions that invoke the presence of Heaven and the spirit of common humanity that does not need Heaven to sanctify our loved ones. In this new ethico-spiritual aesthetic, diversity in expression beautifies rather than divides.

¹⁷⁹ I am not the first scholar to use this term. I have not, however, seen any other scholar unite "secular" and "spirituality" to mean what I intend in this work: an interpretive and performance frame in which multiple expressions of transcendence and encounter with the sacred, the universe, the author(s) of the universe, or the basic ground of self in relation to the basis for all existence, can co-exist, with or without the additional frame of religious codification.

Parameters of ritual performance

It is important to see the Circuit as ritual performance, but ritual with a Gay twist. Since Gay people come from so many ethnicities, traditional Gay performance rituals (such as coming out, pride parades, drag shows, women's music festivals, and AIDS Quilt showings¹⁸⁰) encourage a broad range of individual and cultural expression within an agreed-upon communal frame. The setting is codified, but not the script. These rituals have their own values; self-determination, individual expression, and cultural diversity become sacred and are key ethical elements. What is most remarkable is that the internal contradictions that could come with multiculturalism and undermine it (some cultures have well-defined performances of enmity against other cultures) are downplayed and even erased within the Gay multicultural context. Quite simply, cultural conflict is considered tacky and is therefore studiously avoided whenever possible.

When we think of rituals, we often imagine them as formal affairs with clearly defined scripts. Catherine Bell, however, feels that formality and routine are not essential prerequisites. "Ritual is never simply or solely a matter of routine, habit, or 'the dead weight of tradition,'" she says (Bell 92-93).

¹⁸⁰ Except for drag shows, all of these rituals tend to have a strong spiritual as well as secular dimension.

By ritual performance, I mean that ritual is staged or *framed*. Richard Bauman says, "performance sets up, or represents, an interpretative frame within which the messages being communicated are to be understood, and that this frame contrasts with at least one other frame, the literal" (Bauman 9). Much of performance is recognized by its frame more so than its content. One example of the symbolic nature of the performance frame would be "groundbreaking," when an official ceremoniously pushes a shovel into the earth to "begin" building a structure. It is the gesture-within-frame that counts at that moment, not the efficiency of dirt removal.

Linking performance with ritual is problematic, however, because this implies that ritual can be reduced to drama (Bell 42-43). If an action is done within a performance frame with spectators to observe it within that frame, it is theatrical, which implies that it is a dramatization and therefore make-believe. In order not to equate ritual with fiction (but not necessarily exclude drama as ritual), Bell says that ritual "always aligns one within a series of relationship [sic] linked to the ultimate sources of power... it always suggests the ultimate coherence of a cosmos in which one takes a particular place" (Bell 141). In other words, ritual connects us to and defines us within the real universe. In ritual, we cosmically situate ourselves and tap into ultimate sources of power. All ritual is spiritual to the degree that we personally encounter the cosmos. The degree of spiritual

importance depends upon how intense and intimate the encounter is between the performer of ritual and the universe that witnesses the performance. The religious significance of the script is secondary.

Ritual at its best is dramatic and theatrical, juxtaposing symbolic elements in such a way as to move participants and observers. Ritual generates a memorable experience where we encounter basic realities that validate cherished principles and reinforce binding relationships.

It is important, however, that the experience not be simply a dramatization. Ritual involves real, not fictional, encounter. It brings us face-to-face with something or someone, even if that someone is ourselves. When we purposefully encounter something or somebody, such as the state (e.g. a flag-raising ceremony), a deity (prayer), the dead (bringing flowers to a grave), another person (a handshake), or ourselves (contemplation), our actions have ritual importance to the degree in which the encounter situates the participants face-to-face with a cosmos that is likewise aware of them.

Non-fictional encounter is what makes ritual different in kind from a Broadway play. If we take into account, however, that the best performances of fiction tend to assist us in our own spiritual quests (as per the aesthetic philosophy

of Abhinavagupta¹⁸¹), it is likely that much of our fiction often behaves as if it were ritual. Devotees of stage plays such as *Rent*, *Madame Butterfly*, or *The Lion King* would probably attend those performances in order to experience their ritual power when the truths invoked by the performance transcend the fictional quality of the script. The highly ritualized performance of opera and Noh (and the behavior of both the performers and the audience) would most certainly place an outstanding performance into the realm of ritual and, I submit, spiritual expression.

By focusing on encounter, we can see the close relationship between ritual, performance, and theater. Goffman defines performance as "all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers" (Goffman 22). If a performance is non-fictional, cosmic in scope, and undertaken as a symbolic act that is itself embedded in a spiritual narrative that gives it meaning (with the theatricality that such an embedded act implies), then it is ritual performance.

¹⁸¹ Abhinavagupta was a 10th century Hindu theological philosopher who argued that aesthetic pleasure could trigger transcendental religious experiences. In *Acting as a Way of Salvation*, David Haberman says, "Abhinavagupta was primarily concerned with the aesthetic experience of an audience involved in watching any good drama...For him this experience involves a sympathetic identification (*tan-mayi-bhavana*) with a portrayed situation that has the ability to draw people out of their own everyday world. It is in this sense that dramatic experience is transcendental and therefore valuable" (Haberman 35).

Goffman also uses a superbly applicable term: "team," which is one or more performers in a performance (Goffman 80). The fluidity of individual and group in Goffman's definition is perfect as a means for describing ritual performances of masculinity in which one may be a solo performer, audience, and teammate, simultaneously or in rapid succession.

Let us look at three ritual performances that help men situate themselves in the cosmos: terrorism, war, and Circuit parties. We will begin with terrorism and its foundation in theologies of human sacrifice and holy war.

The transformative ecstasy of religious terrorism as human sacrifice

The purpose of war is victory over enemies. When people are killed in battle, they are casualties of war, an unfortunate but inescapable result. The purpose of terrorism, however, is the production of victims. Although framed by its adherents as holy war, modern religious terrorism reflects many of the properties of a different religious event: human sacrifice.

Among the many examples in human history of religious ritualized violence within a theatrical narrative, human sacrifice in pre-colonial Meso-America really stands out. The production of victims occurred in a complex cultural matrix involving warfare, sports, religious ritual, politics, national

security, and personal status. The epistemological basis of these rituals was based on theologies of divine incarnation and resurrection.¹⁸²

Take for example the Mexica, more commonly known as the Aztecs. Two reasons why the Aztecs sacrificed people were to help Good prevail over Evil, and to re-enact cosmic dramas of conflict where the gods themselves were sacrificed. The re-enactments were linked closely to warfare and sports.

According to Alison Futrell, author of *Blood in the Arena*,

The Mexica, or Aztecs, began their rise to power as highly stratified warrior bands...The leadership shifted the focus of religious practice to the cult of the sun, dominated by the militant deity Huitzilopochtli who represented the powers of good in the constant universal struggle against darkness and death. Huitzilopochtli demanded continual expansion of the Aztec Empire because of his ever-growing need for the nourishment provided by human sacrifice, the majority of victims being prisoners of war. Should this nourishment not be provided, then the Mexica, indeed, the entire universe, was threatened with annihilation (Futrell 172).

¹⁸² The Mayan text *Popol Vuh* gives prominence to the “Place of Ball Game Sacrifice,” which contained the altar for sacrificing ballplayers who lost (Tedlock 352). Sacrifice in Mayan legend could include the resurrection and transformation of god-victims (Tedlock 134-137). The importance of human/divine sacrifice of Jesus in Christianity, the premium placed on martyrdom, and the license given to the Inquisition for torturing people and burning them alive have similar theology and ethics as the pre-Contact Meso-Americans, which may have made the wholesale conversion of Central America to Catholicism much easier. It may be for this reason that graphic Passion plays (dramas in which volunteers reenact the Crucifixion by actually hanging a man on a cross and subjecting him to excruciating pain) are more popular in Mexico than in most of the Christian world.

The Aztecs held games in which human sacrifice played an important part of the closing ceremonies. After ritual games played between two teams (perhaps the first recorded team sport), players would be sacrificed. These games could be oracular, and the outcome might determine a course of action for the rulers of a community (Noble, *Mexico* 65).

There were also economical and political incentives for personal gain behind the desire for human sacrifice. Providing victims could give the contributor higher social status, and mass sacrifices would serve as a warning to neighboring states to remain subservient to the supremacy of the Mexica. According to Futrell, “Moctezuma II invited enemy leaders to his inaugural celebrations in which the best of their warriors were slaughtered by the thousands, surely a powerful object lesson for those concerned” (Futrell 172).

These rituals were theatrical in nature, with casting, costumes, props, stage directions, rehearsals, and audiences. In *Theatres of Human Sacrifice*, Mark Pizzato says that the Aztecs “sacrificed warriors taken in battle, after costuming and rehearsing them as god-actors” (Pizzato 31). This included a preference for good-looking victims who, if overweight, would be put on a diet. The value of high-quality sacrificial victims was such that the Aztec would declare “flower wars” where they would take care not to harm their valuable prisoners/Gods (Pizzato 32).

Before the sacrifice, victims were often treated well and showered with popular devotion as the Gods they were chosen to represent. Notice, however, that honor was not directed to the victim *per sé* but to the God he represented and to the warrior who provided him for execution.

The relationship between the prisoner and the warrior who captured him could be quite intimate. The warrior identified himself with the man/God whom he defeated/worshipped. After the sacrifice, he would wear the victim's skin, simultaneously representing the victim and the God (Pizzato 27, 34).

Like Meso-Americans, Romans also practiced human sacrifice and framed it in terms of war and sports. Human sacrifice was formally declared illegal in 97 BCE (Kirsch 54). But one form of human sacrifice would continue for 300 more years: the gladiatorial games, which were originally spectacles of mortal combat to honor newly dead nobility or to thank the Gods for a victory. The popularity of the games turned them into huge theatrical productions that needed huge venues, such as the Colosseum. Somewhat like the God-captives of the Aztecs, successful gladiators were the subject of popular adoration and could achieve superstar status (Köhne and Ewigleben 7). And like Azteca human sacrifices, the gladiatorial *ludi* (games) were also a means for social advancement for those who sponsored them, and strong political statements concerning might of the ever-expanding Empire.

The biggest difference was that gladiator heroes were rewarded with their lives and occasionally their freedom.

Futrell describes gladiatorial combat:

The *munera*, the gladiatorial combats, are the most infamous of Rome's blood sports. The term literally means "duties" or "obligations," originally defined in terms of the duty owed to the deceased by his survivors but eventually identified with the duty owed the people of Rome by its leaders...The [gladiatorial] amphitheater must be viewed in association with Roman Imperialism as a conscious means of persuasion of the legitimacy, supremacy, and potential for violence of the Roman State (Futrell 10).

For both the Aztecs and the Romans, war, sports, and human sacrifice were usually men-on-men action. When women were involved, they were rarely anything other than victims or spectators.

Religious terrorists reflect many pro-sacrifice Meso-American and Roman values. In *Terror in the Mind of God*, Mark Juergensmeyer states that acts of religious terrorism are performances of sacred drama that are designed to 1) make symbolic statements and 2) transform the world:

Increasingly, terrorism has been performed for a television audience around the world. In that sense it has been as real a global event as the transnational events of the global economy. Ironically, terrorism has become a more potent global political force than the organized political efforts to control and contain it...This global dimension of terrorism's organization and audience, and the transnational responses to it, gives special significance to the understanding of terrorism as a public performance of violence—as a social event with both real and symbolic aspects...These rites of violence have brought an alternative view of public reality—not just a single society in transition, but a world

challenged by strident religious visions of transforming change (Juergensmeyer 144).

Like the Aztecs and Romans, terrorists aim to establish the supremacy of their own imagined theocracy by demonstrating how powerless their enemies are in the face of divinely-mandated violence. Terrorists usually see themselves as fighting a holy war that is cosmic in scope, and the act of terrorism is framed as a selfless sacrifice that must include the dramatic execution of unwilling victims. The victims of terrorism may purposefully include the terrorists themselves as victims,¹⁸³ thus perpetuating a mythos of sympathetic identification akin to the Aztec victim-god and the Roman gladiator-as-hero. This is not that far from the popular warrior-martyr ideal that the modern American soldier has inherited from the time of the Crusades.

In each of these performances of violence, the act of killing is transformed (that is, *ritualized*, sometimes after the fact) into a sacred performance of duty that, I believe, leads to ecstatic pleasures, at least for the audience sponsoring the performance and the men who kill. Once the people in charge acquire a taste for these pleasures, terrorism-as-sacrifice is performed with regularity. We need only

¹⁸³ The similarities between the performance of terrorism and the conduct of soldiers at war make the boundary between the two permeable and subjective: one person's terrorist can be another's war hero. Terrorists, in fact, tend to identify themselves as soldiers. The difference (which is not always easy to determine) lies in what is defined as an appropriate target of violence and the perceived difference between "casualty" and "victim."

look at the popularity of suicide bombings and covert torture in our own contemporary cultures, two forms of terrorism that can be found across the globe.

Nations label human sacrifice as inappropriate and evil, even as they justify doing it themselves. They usually frame the performance of those who suicide bomb or practice torture as outlaw behavior outside of expected ethical norms, so their institutions that sponsor such activities take great pains to hide the terrorist activities they sponsor and, when caught, either denounce their operatives as rogue players, or frame such outlaws as heroes and their terrorist performances as appropriate acts of defense rather than torture and/or murder.

Keep in mind that, in many Fundamentalist religious communities, the terrorists that emerge from their midst are outlaws who step outside of the realm of proper conduct and are no longer representative of the religious community. From the viewpoint of the terrorists, however, their transgression sanctifies them even further. They step out of line to do the hard things that most societies do not condone. As such, they are Heaven's own rebels whose actions come from pushing the Fundamentalist beliefs of their source communities to their logical extremes. This would include US soldiers who torture prisoners, often with tacit approval of their superiors.

Terrorist acts fulfill the criteria previously mentioned for ritual. They are often full of heavy symbolic value attached not only to the target but also the date

of the attack. Terrorist performance is highly theatrical; it involves costumes, props, and the designation of a location for the “staging” of the act that signifies a dramatic encounter set within a much bigger cosmic narrative. The terrible face-to-face immediacy of a bombing, execution, or torture session is a horrific, non-fictional, and, cloaked, buffered, and sanctified by a strong sense of divine justice.

A distinctive element of the terrorist ritual is the role of the victims. The terrorist act is known in advance only by the perpetrators, which guarantees the element of surprise so that the victims cannot avoid stepping out of the ordinary world and being incorporated into the bloody ecstasy of the performance. These acts are usually not designed simply to kill people as if they were passive spectators. The performance of terrorism includes the hapless victim as a performer, albeit an unwilling one, whose suffering is a reflection of the evils inflicted upon the righteous that inspired the terrorist act in the first place. We can see the importance that terrorists place on the victim-as-performer by the frequency in which these performances include torture and mutilation. The victim is expected to perform agony. As such, the victim is cherished and desired by the terrorist.

Horrible carnage is often justified by the terrorists’ willingness to sacrifice their own lives. By incorporating their own deaths into the ritual performance of violence, terrorists become sacrificial victims (potentially, at least) as well as the

executioners of justice. Since the role of the hero-victim in spiritual discourse is quite significant, it is no surprise to find mythical language and the rites of military honors, religious revivals, passion plays, and millennialist fervor for end-of-the-world cataclysm in describing, conducting, and justifying the ecstatic experience of destruction. Terrorists live and breathe the violent legends of their respective fundamentalist communities, especially the suicide bombers. The story of the hero-victim is no longer a metaphor, myth, or proxy when one includes a bomb in one's clothing for the day. The will to die represents an immediate and available identity/experience for those who choose the path to martyrdom and seek to expand its blessings to hapless passers-by.

We must not overlook the role of pleasure in the performance of terrorism. Part of the pleasure comes from bonding with those who have made the same commitment to the cause. Like the military, there is the production of punitive solidarity that comes when one dedicates oneself to God's team (or its ideological equivalent for non-theists) against the forces of evil. Sources of pleasure associated with punitive solidarity would include acting out one's dominance of one's foes, the warmth associated with defending the good, and freedom from normal moral restrictions. In other words, it is a sanctified form of spiritual vanity. I also suspect that there is pleasure in bonding with one's victims as a fellow victim, a claim of innocence when willing to die in the company of the

innocent. The most important pleasure, however, is the same as that felt by Meso-American priests and Roman fans of the gladiatorial games: transgressive, excessive, bloody violence as high drama.

I submit that dedication to egocentric holy vengeance as a license to perform violence in front of an audience is the reason so many of the warrior-martyrs enthusiastically engage in bloodbaths. But it is also eroticized vengeance. Overtly, this violence-fueled eroticism is framed as heterosexual. Speaking of the self-martyrs of the Hamas movement, Juergensmeyer says, “They expect that the blasts that kill them will propel them to a bed in heaven where the most delicious acts of [hetero]sexual consummation will be theirs for the taking” (Juergensmeyer 198). Folk rituals associated with suicide bombers in Palestine celebrate the deaths of their heroes as wedding parties (Juergensmeyer 166).

But we should not assume that the sexual urge for terrorists is always heteronormative. Juergensmeyer says that terrorism, which he points out is overwhelmingly performed by men, has a homoerotic side to it (Juergensmeyer 202-204). For most terrorists, however, conscious realization of homoerotic tendencies in their rituals would cause tremendous cognitive dissonance. Such homosexual urges must be sublimated, which would necessitate strong condemnation of homosexuals, especially by those within the organization who might be themselves troubled by feelings of same-sex desire.

I suspect that the sexual orientation of a significant number of male suicide bombers and torturers is homosexual because so much of mystical theology of homophobic religious discourse in many religions is homoerotic.¹⁸⁴ Those who feel burdened by same-sex desire can resort to martyrdom/infliction of pain as means of penance and public proof that they are Straight and manly (thus restoring and sanctifying their shattered egos), all the while surreptitiously enjoying homoerotic pleasure in the punitive performance of violent cosmic drama.

In addition, I submit that homoeroticism, homophobia, and the promise of salvific heterosexual reorientation are all means for successfully recruiting men who have sex with men, but are ashamed of their desires. Astute recruiters would channeling homoerotic desires of vulnerable volunteers in order to harden the resolve of future executioners, suicide bombers, and torturers. When same-sex desire is allowed no other outlet, or when it is mindlessly fulfilled in secret

¹⁸⁴ Take into account the homoerotic language of Roman Catholic male mystics, including Bernard de Clairvaux and Juan de la Cruz. As Kripal points out, “Christian male erotic mysticism is inevitably homoerotic” because, in the mystical union with God, it would be blasphemy to imagine God as feminine and penetrated by the male devotee. God *must* be The Man, the Penetrator, and the male devotee *must* therefore resort to homoerotic language or engage in spiritual transgender fantasies. This also means that “homosexually oriented or simply homoerotic males become canonical by virtue of their sublimated homosexualities, which happen to ‘fit’ the textual, doctrinal, and symbolic structures of the Catholic tradition” (Kripal, *Roads of Excess* 72-73).

desperation and causes the closeted homosexual terrible anguish and self-loathing, it may covertly fuel acts of violence involving gratuitous bloodshed, mutilation, and same-sex rape in the sacred quest for pride of self.¹⁸⁵

The relatively higher occurrence of terrorist activities among war-based theological communities of different religions, coupled with virulent homophobia, also leads avowed enemies to become strange political bedfellows as they justify the oppression of Gay people. One result of Gay liberation in Israel (and in the UN) has been a rather awkward and sporadic solidarity “movement” of some Fundamentalist Jews, Christians, and Muslims against it. This is especially true in Jerusalem, which has seen protests from representatives of all three groups in the last few years when the GLBT community plans its Pride parade. I have no doubt that the anti-Muslim Jewish homophobes and anti-Jewish Muslim homophobes applaud each other’s calls for violence against Gay people.

I submit that part of this supposed unity between Muslim and Jewish segments of Israeli/Palestinian society is the need to continue the violence between them, unencumbered by GLBT awareness that undermines the sacred masculinity of the warrior-martyr and the deep, resounding pleasures associated with theatrical public violence. In order to continue performances in which they

¹⁸⁵ It therefore stands to reason that any society that is serious about stopping terrorism should actively promote Gay culture and Gay rights.

enthusiastically bomb, execute, and torture each other, it is important for Muslim, Christian, and Jewish holy war enthusiasts to “smear the queer.”

Communitas

Anthropologist Victor Turner coined the term *communitas* in reference to the moment of communal ecstasy that is marked by subversion of the social barriers that separate participants. Defined as "humankindness," Turner describes it as "an essential and generic human bond, without which there could be *no* society" (Turner 97). *Communitas* is most apparent during ritual moments of "liminality," when people are neither one thing nor another and without status. Turner sees *communitas* as a universal phenomenon, "a transformative experience that goes to the root of each person's being and finds in that root something profoundly communal and shared" (Turner 138).

Normative communitas, bonding for the purpose of explicit social engineering, is specifically utilized by initiations designed to transform a human being into a different person. Initiations routinely force the production of *communitas* through oppression. Initiates are reduced to a status-less state through suffering, fear, awe, and the elimination of all possible distinctions. In this state of communal degradation, initiates can bond with each other.

Ideological communitas is that same force of humankindness that models for utopian societies with, as Turner puts it, “explicitly formulated views on how men may best live together in comradely harmony” (Turner 134).

Spontaneous communitas is "a phase, a moment, not a permanent condition" that occurs on its own with the free consent of those who enjoy it (Turner 140). Instead of promoting a specific goal, it tends to open up possibilities. Turner calls it "ecstasy" that is "richly charged with affect, mainly pleasurable ones" (Turner 139). Normative and ideological *communitas* are means by which the bonding power of spontaneous *communitas* can be generated and manipulated. As such, spontaneous *communitas* is the source of normative *communitas* rituals and ideological *communitas* theories. Thus it is important for such rituals and ideologies to at least pay lip service to the voluntary assent of initiates and universal principles of human solidarity.

Turner claims that *communitas* is significantly different from Durkheimian solidarity, which maintains the distinction between the in-group and outsiders (Turner 132). I find Turner's definition of *communitas* to be overly naive, however. There are many ways in which humans can define themselves so that, ideologically, they bond with all of humanity and the cosmos, yet still single out those whom they despise. The US Declaration of Independence is saturated with ideological *communitas*. This did not prevent those who signed it from creating a

nation in which slavery was legal, and denying women the right to participate in their own governance. All that is necessary is a definition that excludes certain groups from being considered human, mature, or good.

The military: designing acceptable outlaws

When we look at the pleasures of military camaraderie and the ecstasy of terrorism, we find that normative *communitas* is at work in the “basic training” rituals that bond the warriors/executioners together, and ideological *communitas* in the theories, legends, and cosmologies that justify the existence of the organization. A feature of rituals and initiations that foster normative *communitas* is that the communal sharing is often tightly bound and restricted to a specific group. The bonding power of *communitas* as a social force is focused the initiates to bind them together. The result of this bonding/binding is a strong interpersonal ego-identity that can easily be aimed as a weapon against others who are not within the sacred sphere of carefully-tailored *communitas*, universal in theory, elite in application.

I experienced normative *communitas* in its martial form when I went through Marine Corps boot camp in 1983. The transformative nature of Marine Corps training is expressed in the folk saying, “Once a Marine, always a Marine.”

Unlike other branches of the military, a Marine never really leaves the Corps. The cosmic significance of Marine Corps initiation is apparent in the drill instructors' mission to indoctrinate the recruits for "God, country, and Corps," in that order. Notice how the universal is first encapsulated in reference to the nondenominational "God." Only then is the focus narrowed to "country," then further narrowed to "Corps."¹⁸⁶

In keeping with that tradition of transformation and indoctrination, I never refer to myself as a Marine in past tense. I suspect that many militant *jihadis* have similar sentiments.

We should not be surprised that terrorism follows war with such distressing regularity. In civil society, disputes are resolved in the courts precisely so that people who feel as if they have been wronged do not take the law into their own hands. Since the formation of the *Code of Hammurabi*, the primary purpose of law has been the prevention of vendetta.

War, however, is the failure of law, even when it is dressed up as the enforcement of law. Only when framed as a socially and/or divinely sanctified ritual of sacrifice can war even come close to being considered ethical. Further framing of war as dramatic performance akin to the theatricality of team sports

¹⁸⁶ A similar, but non-military (and much less violence-oriented), transformation of self came with my initiation as an *ogã* in Candomblé when I was bonded with the community and those universal forces personified as the *orixás*.

and the dominance of the masculine in the sex act can be seen in our language: it is in the *theater* of war that military leaders *stage* battles to *penetrate* the position of the enemy and *score* a victory if our troops do not *drop the ball*.¹⁸⁷

But the reality of war is not accurately represented when described in terms of sports, sex, and dramatic performance. Soldiers are trained to do the most uncivil acts, such as blowing up buildings and shooting each other on sight. In order to prepare our soldiers to perform clearly transgressive and excessive unethical acts, we bind them together with techniques designed to invoke normative *communitas*; we sanctify them as protectors of the nation, downplay their outlaw status, treat them like sports heroes if they come back whole, and venerate them as warrior-martyrs “sacrificed on the Altar of Freedom”¹⁸⁸ when they come back in body bags.¹⁸⁹ But, try as we may, anyone trained to kill represents a potential danger when they come back home, even when society

¹⁸⁷ Sports and sex are likewise framed in the language of battle. All three interpenetrate in common speech. As mentioned earlier, there is also the conspicuous presence of homoerotic references in men’s sports and military discourse.

¹⁸⁸ The popularity of the sacrifice metaphor in terrorism and conventional warfare demonstrates just how thin the epistemological line is between those two forms of masculine performance and human sacrifice.

¹⁸⁹ There is a problem, however, when they come back wounded. Although we try to give them respect, they represent the moral failure that is intrinsically part of war in a way that we find difficult to romanticize or sanctify, so we usually end up at some point simply ignoring them, just as we ignore injured athletes.

needs such people in order to function. We pretend for their sakes that our veterans are not at all a threat.¹⁹⁰

Normative *communitas* is invoked in the training of soldiers because each soldier must be humbled and ready to submit to authority without question before we grant them license to destroy. We allow our warriors to be proud of their skills, but we insist that they be on a very short leash. The training cannot be superficial; it must run deep and be well-entrenched in their individual and collective psyches. Once they choose to be soldiers, much of their training conditions them to give up their freedom of choice (as in the old Marine Corps joke, “If I want your opinion, I’ll give it to you”), even to the point that they no longer privilege their own self-preservation. The best way to do this is to invoke a form of punitive solidarity with strong secular-spiritual or thinly-veiled religious overtones.

In simple terms, rituals for normative *communitas* are intrinsically punitive; initiators usually crush initiates into a state of statusless degradation by forcing them to endure shared suffering. The permanent transformation that normative *communitas* is supposed to imprint upon the initiate an explicit ideological purpose that can readily be exploited in terms of an “Us Against

¹⁹⁰ For the most part, the pretense works. Most veterans never consider applying their military skills against their own people.

Them” protective-punitive ideology. In the best of soldiers, however, their outlaw status is tempered by humanitarian ethics that theoretically supersede the wishes of their superiors and the thirst for vendetta that is fostered by the battlefield experience. Officially, the military expects soldiers to display humanitarian ethics. In practice, however, the humanitarian is often superseded by loyalty to the pack and submission to authority at all costs for the survival of the troop.

It is telling that current military language in the US Armed Forces describes conflict in terms of “good guys” (us) and “bad guys” (them). This simplistic dichotomy, taken from the language of children and irresponsibly applied with unregulated vanity in favor of our troops, is part of a recipe for oppression that is becoming distressingly apparent in the attitudes and performances of our soldiers overseas in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The spiritual ecstasy of the Circuit

In contrast with terrorists and soldiers (but not necessarily in opposition to them¹⁹¹), we have Circuiteers.

¹⁹¹ It is impossible to cleanly separate the terrorist from other more ethical forms of sado-masochism. Since the Circuit includes Leather events, I will not portray the terrorist and the Circuiteer as polar opposites.

Like terrorists and soldiers, Circuit participants are outlaws who transgress the normal bounds of propriety of their larger community. Here are some differences: the Circuit is a ritual frame in which all of the participants join together into one multifaceted Goffmanian team that has no need of enemies or victims. When Circuiteers step out to dance, there is no special performance expected of them other than the individual's own fierce self-expression, and there is no permanently transformative goal that all participants must achieve.

What can be permanent is the memory of witnessing one's own personal transformation and immersion into communal ecstasy. Participants in the Circuit often narrate moments when the sexiness, the music, the dancing, and the sheer joy of showing off for each other will catapult the crowd into a state of hyper-awareness.¹⁹² In a time out of time, people dance "like there is no tomorrow." A party with no such moments is a failure. Circuit *communitas* is not like the normative *communitas* I experienced when being initiated as a Marine on Parris Island or a Candomblé *ogã*. Normative *communitas* is the result of manipulative directives for *reducing* participants as a means of eliminating status, while the

¹⁹² In an interview with DJ Barry Harris, I asked him if he had ever felt a total bonding with the crowd. His eyes lit up and he spoke of it as an experience without equal, as if he and the crowd were, for that moment, telepathically bonded. When I asked him if he would consider that experience spiritual, he agreed. Most DJs I have interviewed have had similar experiences (Weems, "The Circuit" 204).

spontaneous *communitas* of the Circuit elevates participants into a state of statusless grandeur through shared joy.¹⁹³ The biggest difference is the role of coercion. Normative *communitas* is goal-oriented and marked by the regulation of routine by authority figures whose will is not to be questioned. The regulatory properties of events that generate spontaneous *communitas* tend to be more fluid; they are carnivalesque in nature and are determined by the very people who are undergoing the transformative process.

The spontaneous *communitas* of the Circuit is, using Turner's word, "invoked," not forced (Turner 138). All are invited to *rise* to the heights of transcendent solidarity together. The more participants who are raised up, the greater the joy is for all concerned. *Communitas* is a priceless gift that the dancers give to each other without coercion. To achieve it, the Circuit must remain a frame that fosters spontaneity and encourages the creative expression of the participants. It *cannot* be a boot camp.

But all is not sweetness and light. Like homoeroticism, masculine egocentrism is a common thread in terrorist, military, and Circuit epistemologies. The ego of the Circuit-as-group is focused on its more attractive participants, who invariably will display various degrees of body fascism that tend to filter through

¹⁹³ In terms of performance, however, both normative and spontaneous *communitas* rituals involve communal degradation and elevation. I should add that unfortunate circumstances can lead to spontaneous *communitas*, such as a natural disaster, shared disease, or massacre that bonds people together.

to the rest of the crowd as people critically check out whoever approaches them to see if they “rate.” Once in the milieu, it is extremely difficult for most participants to keep from buying into body fascism, especially in cold, analytical regard concerning their own bodies. Most of them will hit the gym months in advance before the party, appropriately groom themselves a short time prior to the event, and wear just the right outfits for peacock-esque display on the dance floor. I know for a fact that egocentric display is important in a soldier’s presentation of self (a uniform that is flawlessly perfect, what Marines call “locked and cocked”). I strongly suspect that the same concern for image is true for terrorists as well.

When we look at the Circuit, the demand for personal excellence means participants are free to elevate or degrade each other at will. No drill sergeants are there to enforce a code and regulate behavior. We can assume, however, that most everyone wants to have a good time. It is in their best interests to help each other in pursuit of happiness and bond together on the dance floor. This is not easy, however, when so much scrutiny is placed on the participant’s appearance, performance, and attitude. Personal ego is on the line.

The difference is that personal ego in the Circuit is tied to physical appearances (and, to a less immediate degree, witty repartee) rather than cosmic war. All of that masculine vanity that tempts beautiful Circuit men to act with insufferable arrogance is so trivial when compared to the grand egocentrism

attached to religious fundamentalism, a form of holy vanity that all too often allows one to damn perceived enemies to eternal hell. Encouraging one to eternally damn others is only a short cognitive distance from empowering one to kill and maim. The performance of icy disdain by the body fascist is every bit as obnoxiously vain as the worst extremist shouting death to his enemies at the top of his lungs in front of a TV camera, but much less harmful to society. In terms of concrete manifestations of physical force, the arrogant power of muscle in the Circuit replaces the ego-power of the gun, the bomb, and the helpless victim at one's feet in military and terrorist outlaw dynamics.

Bonding in the Circuit reaches its grandest expression when the DJ and dancers enter into a state of fierce solidarity, when all distinctions crumble in the face of shared joy. But first, the participants must feel confident enough (in other words, *fierce* enough) to allow social barriers to fall. If we look at the root causes for body fascism and drug use, we will see that both are means by which participants attempt to feel comfortable in the performance frame of the Circuit.

Preoccupation with physical appearance and drugs are not ends in themselves. Looking like a Greek god and getting intoxicated do not guarantee a good time. If they did, Circuit boys would do nothing but get high by themselves and dance in front of a mirror, which is, in fact, similar to the behavior of "clones" (physically attractive Gay men who strive to have just the right look and

who end up looking like each other) when they seek copies of themselves on the dance floor. Nevertheless, clones still join a crowd consisting of all kinds of body types, precisely so that they can bask in public adulation. The body beautiful is, first and foremost, one accessory among several for attraction. In turn, intoxicants are used as social lubricants to reduce the friction that one feels when exposed to the scrutiny of so many other people. When used properly, drugs allow participants to express their attraction to the objects of their desire, or at the very least, be tolerant of the less attractive.

I submit that a high level of performance anxiety is necessary for the production of fierce solidarity. It is the common predicament faced by the vast majority of participants, a form of shared oppression that differs from the oppression imposed upon initiates in normative *communitas* in that most Circuit participants are unaware that almost everyone else, even the most beautiful, share this anxiety. In the isolation that participants feel when they step into the venue and onto the dance floor, there is an almost palpable need for the group to overcome isolation in favor of solidarity.

The ability to overcome painful performance anxiety by both the individual and the collective is also different from the suffering of initiates in normative *communitas* in that it does not face the additional anguish of having no

other option but to suffer. At any point, a Circuiteer may step away from the party. The threefold desire to share, judge, and be admired keeps them there.

As mentioned earlier, positive attention is the coin of the realm. When the majority of participants agree to let down their barriers and spend their attention on each other, everyone profits. This is why hilarity is so vital to fierce solidarity: it creates instant intimacy through appreciation of the absurd, both in others and in ourselves. To laugh heartily in public is to step outside of oneself in temporary ecstasy, to lose control of oneself physically and mentally, for the duration of the laugh. Since laughing is extremely pleasurable, it is also attractive because others want to share in the humor. Targets of humorous remarks gain major prestige when they can laugh at themselves, thus performing the antithesis of arrogance in the quest for ego gratification.

Humor is a vital performance genre intrinsic to the community's internal regulatory mechanisms. It also prevents codification of the ritual performance. Anyone who attempts to solemnize the neo-shamanistic elements of Circuit ecstatic dance is, whether they deserve it or not, a candidate for spoof and ridicule. There have been normative movements, such as Soul Dance, to channel Circuit spirituality as a means for group psychic healing by reducing or eliminating drug use and having dancers follow a script (Lennox, Kammon, and Maris 38-40). So far, these movements have been unsuccessful. Arguably, such

admirable efforts have not caught on because of the importance of masculinized excess and transgression in Circuit expressive culture. Getting intoxicated, having a body with more muscles than it needs, and humorous exaggeration of stigmas and scandalous behavior are all treasured features of Circuit male bonding. There is also the theatrical frame of the Circuit as a carnivalesque happening designed for spontaneous *communitas*. Regulation of social dynamics must necessarily be kept at a minimum.

It is because the Circuit community is so competitive and anxiety-ridden that it prizes the moments when the barriers fall, when ridicule transforms into all-inclusive hilarity and acceptance. Instead of a paralyzing fear of being seen as foolish, everyone is welcome to act a fool, to clown around, to laugh. These moments are perhaps the least sexually charged because participants interact in a state of sensual innocence. It is during such moments that, interestingly enough, Gay men can forget that they are Gay and enjoy being men.

CHAPTER 13

THE ETHICS OF PLEASURE

Dilige et quod vis fac (love and do what you will).

Augustine of Hippo

Although rooted in transgression and excess, the dynamics of fierce solidarity have generated a significant amount of discourse within the Circuit community concerning appropriate behavior in the production of ecstatic experiences. Let us look at emic descriptions of Circuit ethics and cosmology that can be found in one primary site for information for the Circuit community:

Circuit Noize.¹⁹⁴

Circuit Noize is perhaps the best known source of information about the Circuit. Signorile calls it “the bible of the Circuit,” darkly suggesting that it is more satanic than angelic (Signorile 76). From the viewpoint of the heteronormative paradigm, it is. Issues have lots of pictures of hot men (mostly but not exclusively White) from cover to cover. Articles cover every taboo topic imaginable, from “barebacking” (unprotected anal sex) to “how-to” advice on

¹⁹⁴ As mentioned earlier, *Circuit Noize* has just recently changed its name to *noiZe*. All of the quotes taken from the magazine are from issues that were printed before the name change, so I will refer to the magazine by its original moniker.

illicit drug use. It is easy to be both mesmerized and shocked by the in-your-face frankness expressed in both pictures and articles. In issues printed from the year 2000 to 2002, in fact, articles and visual erotica have been combined on the same page. Instead of black letters on a white page, pictures of naked and near-naked men were laid out in light pastels that act as a backdrop for the printed word. At some point, the eye must read words superimposed over some man's crotch or the crack of his butt.

Once the scandal has been absorbed, however, the magazine is often more than what initially meets the eye. Articles about safer sex are regular features, including a column entitled "Safe Slut." Problems that arise for Gay men in heteronormal society are routinely addressed. In "Anal Sex," John Ballew examines the silence surrounding anal intercourse:

Where did you learn about anal sex? Did it come up in sex ed classes in junior high? Not likely, I'm afraid. Did Dad talk with you about your butt hole when he discussed the birds and the bees? Doubtful (Ballew 104).

Ballew brings up an important point. Sexual rights for Gay men cannot be adequately imagined if the somatic map of male desire does not include the penetratable territories of the male physique.

Circuit Noize also has printed articles on drug use that discuss how to do drugs safely, what certain drugs do to the body, legal ramifications of drug possession, and how to handle the morning after. Frank discourse on drugs is

perhaps the most transgressive aspect of the magazine, and demonstrates a different set of ethical values concerning recreational drug use. There is no disclaimer telling the reader that abstinence from drugs is the best alternative.

There are plenty of warnings, however, in the spirit of *caveat emptor* and constant admonitions to behave intelligently when under the influence. In an article entitled “Is an X always an E?” Paul Dillon gives a sobering account of PMA, a drug present in pills sold as MDMA that is blamed for the deaths of partygoers in both the Rave and Circuit scenes. He warns:

PMA deaths highlight one of the major risks when using ecstasy. No matter what anyone tells you, you simply never know what you are taking. PMA and DXM [a common ingredient in cold medicine] are two contaminants that have been found in U.S. ecstasy (Dillon 23).

After presenting the reader with the scary truth, Dillon then announces that there are in-house efforts to filter out bad drugs from good ones. He offers a website that posts the latest tests on pills that are currently on the black market (dancesafe.org) and calls for members of the community to send samples of their drugs (with no return address) to the people who run the website.

Let's encourage these pioneers in education by frequently visiting their web site and making contributions by providing ecstasy samples that they need to effectively warn us of the dangers to which we might be exposing ourselves. Through this kind of effort, we can make it unprofitable for drug dealers to use anything but the substance they are claiming to sell us (Dillon 23).

Circuit rights are based on an ethic of responsibility. Government intervention is condemned, sometimes subtly, sometimes blatantly; the Drug Policy Alliance has placed full-page ads in *Circuit Noize* against the “war on drugs.”

The emphasis on in-group enforcement is in part due to blind spots generated by heteronormative discourse that discourage government intervention into the affairs of the Circuit community. What society refuses to see, it does not oppress, and the Circuit has been invisible for most of its existence.

The objectification of the male body also drives away many Straight enforcers of the law. I spoke to a young Straight man who had unwittingly visited West Hollywood, notorious for being L.A.’s Gay ghetto. “I had to leave!” he told me, oblivious to the fact that I am Gay. “These big guys were staring at me like I was a piece of meat!” My young colleague assumed that the objectification of his body by other men meant that he was in physical danger. The realization of his own fuckability, so liberating for a Gay man, caused my young Straight friend great anxiety. It was not possible for him to imagine himself as the penetrator in his narrative on living dangerously in West Hollywood (popularly known as “WeHo”). These men were bigger than him, so *naturally* he saw himself as the passive partner, just as he would do so with a woman whose body he found attractive. He confirmed the words of Leo Bersani: “the ‘original’ Straight man is

metamorphosed, through another man's imagined sexual attention, into the offended, harassed, or even violated woman" (Bersani 17).

There is usually no lack of large, muscular men in any gathering of the Circuit community. Along with the sheer number of Gay men, a situation is created where public space takes on the characteristics of private space. Public display of private behavior gives the space a carnivalesque air; an intoxicating sense of freedom is felt by the community. The collapsing of public and private behaviors is even more pronounced at the dance venues, where rules of sexual propriety are also modified and, in some extreme cases, abandoned altogether. The visual impact of watching so many Gay men dancing sensuously is troubling for many Straight men. Since law enforcement departments tend to be Gay-unfriendly and undercover agents are usually Straight men, infiltration of these events by agents may be problematic. If there are Gay agents, the censure that they would face from the Gay community if they were discovered betraying their own would be substantial. Displays of man-to-man sensuality force an anxious heteronormative community to set up a spatial and psychic shield, culminating in an air of privacy and intimacy in venues that may have as many as 20,000 people present.

Negative publicity, however, can break the protective silences. There is a fear that if too many Gay men kill themselves by overdosing, the authorities will

be forced to get involved. This has led to pat-downs and pocket checks at some events by Gay-friendly (and sometimes not so friendly) workers. Even then, there is a selectivity in what illegal substances warrant notice. When arriving at the end of the line to go into a club, one may be greeted by a smiling employee and told in advance that there will be a search, giving patrons time to discreetly hide their “party favors.”

Articles in *Circuit Noize* that deal with spirituality are the best source for understanding Circuit ethics because they are couched in a vaguely articulated but discernable cosmology based on a set of underlying assumptions: 1) humans have danced since the dawn of time, 2) dance is transformative and unifying, 3) the male body can be simultaneously erotic and holy, 4) drugs can help people reach higher spiritual planes (especially when dancing), 5) sexual energy can be a vehicle for personal transcendence, and 6) the Circuit community is a tribe.

In “Spirituality in the Circuit?” Kirby Schroeder proposes Circuit notions of spirituality by presenting and refuting three “well-known axioms”:

Fun and spirituality don’t mix.
Sex and spirituality don’t mix.
Drugs and spirituality don’t mix (Schroeder 66).

Circuit spirituality, of course, assumes exactly the opposite of the above axioms. All three of them are refuted in terms of an anthropology-inspired vision that incorporates concepts from various non-Western religious traditions. There

is a perennialist bent to Schroeder's arguments; behind all religious experiences is a sense of wonder and interconnectedness, lost to modern sensibilities, that is rediscovered in the neo-tribal Circuit experience. This same perennialist position is taken by Steve Kannon in the way he imagines the "Circuit tribe" in his article, "Creating Gay Ritual":

For millions of years, man used ritual to create continuity and connectedness in his world. As civilization began its insidious process of organizing us into city-states, the power structures that emerged took over the rituals and crushed the life out of them. In the indigenous cultures that still exist today, however, ritual remains a way of life. The people of these cultures understand far better than we how to nourish the spiritual aspect of a human. But most of us in the Circuit already do understand something about ritual (Kammon 40).

As mentioned earlier, one characteristic of Circuit spirituality is the absence of the trappings of religion. Contrary to the provocative image of the Circuit provided by Signorile as an unholy church, there has been no accepted, or even disputed, religious protocol that guides Circuit activities. There are no clergy, scripture (*Circuit Noize* notwithstanding), ritual, prayers, or shared spiritual entities. This absence is troubling to some people in the community because it implies that the experience of fierce solidarity is not spiritual, so they creatively imagine spiritual roots and link the Circuit to primal dance rituals that predate Western religious traditions.

Another important characteristic is the presence of humor. There is a necessary sense of the absurd in Circuit spirituality. Nothing should be taken too seriously, an emphatic reversal of Schroeder's first axiom that could be stated in this way: *Fun and spirituality should mix*. If there is one thing in the Circuit that rivals sexuality in importance, it is the expectation that the Circuit be fun. Irreverence, the most effective tactic in breaking the sober codes of organized religion, is an essential ingredient in the Circuit and has been incorporated into the discourse on spirituality as well.

This irreverence tends to seep into the discourse whether the writer intends for it to be there or not. In "Energy Games" (Fall 1999, 103-104), an article about playful and spiritual use of ketamine, the author (anonymous) makes the following statement in all seriousness: "Special K can be used to open the third eye chakra, allowing us to see and feel things from the metaphysical plane of existence" (104). Still dead serious, he then outlines various games under the following subtitles that can be played with a partner: "Head Rubbing," "Energy Dance," and "Balls in Space" (105). Danny Blaun tells the reader a heartfelt story about how God told him to quit doing drugs but to still go to Circuit events in "A Season for Drugs." On an equally sober yet hysterical note, de la Huerta's article, "God is in the Blowjob" is written in the same manner.

There have been short-lived trends toward religious encoding within the Circuit. One such movement, Soul Dance, has been prominently featured in *Circuit Noize*. An article by Michael Lennox et al called “Dance of the Passionate Heart” describes how Soul Dance is based on West African Dagara religious ritual that was brought to America by Malidoma Some, who was sent by Dagara elders “to be a spiritual leader in the West.” Tribal rhetoric concerning so-called “indigenous cultures” is used to validate Dagara ritual (and, by extension, Soul Dance). Lennox explains that

We believe ourselves superior to indigenous cultures because of our technology. But it is exactly because they have not been pulled into the modern world that indigenous people are more able to create true connections to their spirit nature (39).

Techno dance rituals have been created by Q-Spirit, “an international organization promoting personal growth and spiritual development in the GLBT community.” De la Huerta, founder of Q-Spirit, says that they “have been referred to as ‘Circuit parties for the soul,’ because they include Sufi dancing, rituals, guided meditations, chanting, flagging, and more.” He makes the connection between Gay men in the Circuit tribe and indigenous traditions: “Traditionally, we have played significant roles, roles that can be identified as spiritual: shamans, mediators, keepers of beauty, healers, and sacred clowns” (de la Huerta, “A Party with Soul” 56-59).

The articles on Soul Dance and techno rituals are not troubled by postmodern inquiry concerning neocolonialist appropriation of non-Western traditions. They also tend to criticize the Circuit on some of the same grounds that Signorile does. In their zeal to avoid those things that are volatile and troublesome in the Circuit, both of these movements reflect a noticeable absence of the trademarks of Circuit spirituality concerning transgression and excess in the following areas: irreverence and humor, sex/sensuality, and drugs. In fact, drugs were tacitly discouraged during these rituals/dances. As such, these movements cannot truly be called Circuit events, but were rather religion-informed ritual spaces that attempted to resonate with the Circuit community.

Shamanism and wishful thinking

Some Circuiteers claim that they have shamanistic experiences. In his classic book, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, Mircea Eliade defines "shaman" as a spiritual technician who works outside of the pale of established religions and "is the great master of ecstasy" (Eliade 4). A traditional shaman is a mystical performer who sings, drums, doses with intoxicants, and dances into "a trance during which his soul is believed to leave his body and ascend to the sky or

descend to the underworld.”¹⁹⁵ Gay scholars of religion have turned to anthropological discourse on shamanism to counter the stigma of Gay people as morally and spiritually deprived. They point out that homosexuality is a common characteristic of shamans around the world. Christian de la Huerta states, for example:

Another recurrent theme we encounter among third-gender spiritual functionaries across culture and time lines is the propensity to use dance and sacred hallucinogenic substances as a means to induce trance or altered states of consciousness (de la Huerta 37).

As mentioned earlier, Circuit-as-tribe discourse is heavily indebted to anthropological research on shamanism. The Circuit’s ecstatic trance, however, does not fit neatly into classical anthropological definitions of shamanism. Circuit masculinity, with its strong affinity for the "manly" rather than the "girly" or the androgynous, does not fit into Gay religious scholarship concerning gender-bending "third-gender spiritual functionaries." In keeping with their right to interpret the ecstatic experience as they choose, some Circuiteers would scoff at the notion of comparing the Circuit with shamanism.

¹⁹⁵ Eliade 5. The author also says, “As for the shamanic techniques of ecstasy, they do not exhaust all the varieties of ecstatic experience documented in the history of religions and religious ethnology. Hence any ecstatic cannot be considered a shaman.”

From an academic standpoint, the Circuit is not shamanistic or even neo-shamanistic in design. By "neo-shamanism," I refer to various movements since the 1960s for people in the West to re-establish a connection with the spiritual through their own ecstatic rituals, situated within constructions of tribal identity derived from anthropological literature and literary fiction (Noel 26-188, Pinchbeck 60-76). Nevertheless, the secular dynamics of Circuit ecstatic dance culminate in an important neo-shamanistic practice: ritualized construction of communal identity through shared ecstasy. Participants become ecstatic beings; the spirits that they honor are their own.

CHAPTER 14

TRIBE

Oftentimes, dancing at a gay club invokes a sense of real tribal ritual. The constant, rhythmic beat, the theatrical interplay of music, lighting, décor, and the amorphously sensual mass of bodies moving, gyrating, prancing, touching, and cavorting in seemingly wild abandon, can actually induce a trance state or transcendent experience. Needless to say, this is often heightened by many through the use of mind-altering substances.

Christian de la Huerta, *Coming Out Spiritually* 37

It is not unusual to hear Circuiteers refer to themselves collectively as a tribe. But there are problems with tribal identification that imply cultural insensitivity and possibly racist connotations. We should be careful about associating tribal ritual with “amorphously sensual mass of bodies...cavorting in wild abandon.”¹⁹⁶ Too often, such images perpetuate distorted stereotypes held by people who have never attended a tribal ritual and have no real sense of what tribal identity entails, yet they want to claim tribal identity for themselves.

¹⁹⁶ I have met Christian de la Huerta. He struck me as a humble, educated person who would never say anything to insult anyone, a man who loves all humanity and champions the Gay community. I use his words to dramatically illustrate a point, not criticize him personally.

The nostalgia for tribal values in America has cultural roots in the frontier stories of 19th century European American writers.¹⁹⁷ They romanticized the Indians of the American West as “noble savages,” a people whose simpler lifestyle and worldviews were more authentic than the civilization imposed by White colonizers. Examples of the noble savage in American literature can be found in the stories of James Fenimore Cooper such as *The Last of the Mohicans*. But the fine oratory skills that Cooper attributes to his Indians, their noble bearing, etc., are written as if Cooper is mourning rather than celebrating Native Americans. Cooper writes eulogies to a vanishing race, effectively burying Indians before they are all dead.

When Indians are portrayed as a dying or already dead people, it is up to European Americans to continue the noble (but not the savage) traditions of Native Americans. Whites may tearfully say goodbye to the noble savages and wistfully dream about the days of the Wild West, safe in the knowledge that both are gone forever.

¹⁹⁷ Marianna Torgovnick, author of *Gone Primitive* and *Primitive Passions*, says that Western notions of the primitive (which, I submit, includes nostalgia for tribal ways) are cultural fantasies that are inscribed upon non-Western cultures with little regard for accuracy. By incorporating so-called primitive art and dress into their homes, on their bodies, and in their festivals, many Westerners seek to signify their allegiance to a primal unity behind all things human. The basis of these fantasies is the need for liberation from the pressures of modern life. As Torgovnick tells us, “Everything is freer there, everything is possible” in the phantasmic land of the primitive (*Gone Primitive* 40).

Nowhere is this seen more blatantly than in sports. The racist image of Chief Wahoo, the red-faced grinning mascot of the Cleveland Indians baseball team, is a sad example of such callousness, especially considering that surviving tribes in Ohio were forcibly shipped off to what would become Oklahoma during the Indian Removal Act of 1830.¹⁹⁸ Historical atrocities against real Indians appear not to bother fans of the Cleveland Indians. They collectively call themselves and their team “the Tribe” (a similar situation exists with the Atlanta Braves) to show how fierce they are when they imagine themselves and their team as make-believe warriors. One extreme example of racism thoroughly mixed with tribal nostalgia is the name of Washington, DC’s professional football team, the Redskins.

Circuit tribal discourse is different. When participants say that the Circuit community is a tribe, they never mock Indians, they never invoke warrior status, and they never imply that the Circuit is primitive. The average Circuit boy or girl who is most often a peaceful urban creature, obsessed with diets, DJs, techno-toys, remixed music, and non-organic “party favors” (illegal drugs). The nearest thing that Circuiteers might do to connect themselves with anything natural is to

¹⁹⁸ This is why the recognized capitols of the Shawnee and Miami Indians, both tribes that once lived in Ohio, are in Oklahoma.

smoke a joint. The closest that most of them get to being warriors is when they dress up in military gear for a theme party.

The Circuit appears to be far from tribal in terms of shared mythical discourse. There is no well-defined Circuit cosmology, pantheon, or theology. No rituals have been codified for the express purpose of uniting the community with spirits. Circuit boys do not pray to their ecstasy pills or bless them before consuming them.¹⁹⁹ The word “tribe” makes sense to them because they feel they are a group set apart, not only from Straight society, but from the rest of GLBT society as well.

Within the Circuit community, social bonding is seen as more intense than in the larger Gay community. In the Western imagination, the intimate ritualized relationship that tribal people supposedly share with each other and the universe strikes a chord with many Circuit participants. The Circuit-as-tribe is the Circuit seen in terms of ethnic identity.

Ethnicity is a troublesome concept in itself without applying it to crack whores and body fascists. But, rather than denounce the naiveté of assigning ethnicity to a temporary, transient, outlaw community with members from diverse

¹⁹⁹ This is where Michelangelo Signorile’s portrayal of the circuit as an evangelical church falls apart. He implies a degree of collective agreement and a codified ideology necessary for churches to function that is not reflected in the reality of the collective circuit experience.

ethnicities and religions, let us consider some key anthropological features of ethnic identity from the Circuit perspective: kinship, cosmology, and conduct.

Kinship

Kinship in the Circuit community follows a movement within the Gay community to shift the focus of family values from the primacy of procreation to the primacy of love. In *Families We Choose*, Kath Weston describes this shift during the 1980s:

The sign at the 1987 Gay and Lesbian March on Washington read: “Love makes a family, nothing more and nothing less.” From the stage, speakers arguing for domestic partner benefits and gay people’s right to parent repeatedly invoked love as both the necessary *and the sufficient* criterion for defining kinship. Grounding kinship in love deemphasized distinctions between erotic and nonerotic relationships while bringing friends, lovers, and children together under a single concept. As such, love offered a symbol well suited to carry the nuances of identity and unity so central to kinship in the United States, yet circumvent the procreative assumption embedded in symbols like heterosexual intercourse and blood ties (107).

The notion of kinship has been expanded far beyond the needs of those Gay couples that have children or wish to adopt them. Too many of us come from family situations that disapprove of our sexual orientation and the ways we express ourselves as a community. We turn to each other and started our own

families with our friends and lovers, forging bonds that can be stronger than those that we share with the families into which we are born.

This notion of family is further expanded to the Gay community at large. The word “family” is a Gay code word for “Gay,” as in, “Is So-and-So family?” This illustrates the communal understanding that being Gay is not simply a statement about one’s sexual orientation. Weston says,

In extending homosexuality beyond the sexual, the notion of identity-based community opened new possibilities for using kinship terminology to imagine lesbians and gay men as members of a unified totality. Identity provided the linking concept that lent power to analogies between gay and consanguineal relations (Weston 127).

If one song could be chosen as *the* Gay anthem, it would be “We Are Family” by Sister Sledge. Visit any lesbian or Gay men’s bar during Gay Pride Weekend and, sooner or later, this song will be played, often resulting in a sing-along hug-fest. Gay men will not change the lyrics “I have all my *sisters* with me,” as “sister” (like “family”) is a term of endearment between men in Gayspeak.

Most Circuiteers are Gay men between the ages of 22 and 60. There are few Circuit women and no Circuit children that I know of (although I am familiar with at least one father and his biological son). In the realm of the Circuit, kinship circles can include people who one has met during an event, and with whom one may have spent relatively little time, no more than perhaps a weekend. The quality of the time spent, however, is amplified by the highly intense nature of the

Circuit experience. These relationships may be replicated many times over as people attend more events, and participants find themselves in a web of relationships that allows them to visit any number of cities as welcomed guests whenever the possibility arises, sometimes with people whom they have never met. Internet list-serves catering to the Circuit community are sites where tentative bonds are strengthened, significant friendships are made, and new kinfolk are found.

It is a sign of our times that we may have non-consanguine kinfolk who we have never physically met except online. Kevin and I have opened our home to close friends who we had only known online until the moment they showed up at our doorstep.

Spiritual kinship and cosmology

Circuit kinship is based on the broader notion of Gay male kinship as “sisters.” The sisterhood has its roots further in the solidarity of Gays, Lesbians, Bisexuals, and the Transgendered. In general, the Circuit community shares the anthropology-inspired myth that there have always been Gay people, some of whom were important in the religious life of ancient cultures as priests and shamans. For much of recorded history, however, they were persecuted. The

Stonewall Awakening was the cosmic turning point when Gay folk asserted themselves and their right to exist, a moment that is annually reaffirmed during Pride festivals. Common spiritual ancestors (Sappho, Oscar Wilde, Langston Hughes, We'wha, Harvey Milk, Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin, etc.) are just as important to the Gay community as saints to Roman Catholic/Orthodox Christians and bodhisattvas to Mahayana Buddhists.

Besides this cosmology, the Circuit adds this myth: throughout the ages, there have always been Gay men who danced together. It is through dance that the Circuit community connects with this imagined Gay past and performs its own living myths in real time and space.

David Nimmon describes the myth-experience of fierce tribal solidarity:

The best research is simply to come here, let loose and dance. Let yourself see the undulating sea of smiling faces, experience the camaraderie of sex and spirit which routinely occur, and one senses that something potentially culture-changing is happening here. Afloat in these tides of swaying, smiling men are radical reformations of heart and body. The crowds enjoy a Dionysian mysticism of ecstasy and trance, great physical affection, profound experiments in a sweet community and sociality, all wrapped in a virtual communalism that transcends place. There is something sacred and moving, much transcendent and powerful, in these gatherings of tribe (Nimmons 166).

In the outlaw ecstasy of dance, intoxication, and sensuality, many Gay men discover a sense of belonging, not just as a child of the universe, but as a *Gay* child of the universe. I cannot overstress the importance of this discovery, one

that is a vitally important feature of the Circuit experience for many participants. Circuit boys become, quite literally, brothers (or sisters) in arms, that is, is the arms of their newfound brothers and sisters. Some Circuit boys and girls take it even further. They feel a mystical connection, not just with the other dancers at the party, but with anyone who has ever danced and stepped out of themselves.

Conduct

A byproduct of kinship and cosmology in the Circuit is the regulation of the community by the community, significantly diminishing the need for brute force in the name of public safety.

In popular imagination, a tribe is imagined to be a self-regulating entity without the need for impersonal bureaucracies or institutions. The Circuit community is likewise self-regulating—random acts of kindness and etiquette are the rule, not the exception. If a participant gets out of line, then biting humor or well-placed candor can quickly deflate an over-inflated ego.

In terms of having a violent edge, the worst offenders tend to be ultramasculine, overmuscled, and “Straight-acting” body fascists. But even the biggest body fascists quickly realize that physically aggressive behavior will hurt them if they push it too far. The code of etiquette that regulates aggression by

punishing excessively rude behavior with ridicule is amazingly effective. In the land of the Circuit, positive attention is the coin of the realm, and ridicule is to be avoided like bankruptcy. There is less need for aggressive bouncers in this world; sharp tongues regulate behavior much more effectively than dress codes, metal detectors, or billy clubs.

The Circuit community's preoccupation with beauty and status is a source of anxiety and humiliation for just about everyone, even those who consider themselves to be "A-list" (specimens of physical perfection). One cannot be at the pinnacle without the constant fear of falling off. Nobody, no matter how good-looking, masculine, well connected, or wealthy, is above devastating ridicule by the ugliest, skinniest (or fattest), queeniest participant. Everyone feels the pressures of competition, which is why many Gay men refuse to attend Circuit parties, and why most Circuiteers go with friends for moral support. These pressures shape the way the Circuit community performs as a tribe. All it takes is a single well-placed eye-roll or sarcastic remark from the object of one's desire (or the object of one's disdain) to utterly wreck one's self-esteem.

I was attending the main event of the Winter Party in South Beach, which takes place outdoors on the beach. While taking a break from dancing, I saw five shirtless and lavishly muscled men, all tanned, all rugged, all in jeans and boots (one had a chain attached to his wallet), and all of them living proof that vanity is

the need for others in order to despise them. Not one of them was smiling, and all of them were looking around to see who was looking at *them*. They regarded their surroundings with open disdain bordering on malice. A-List, indeed.

I could not resist. I went over to a friend of mine and pointed these men out to him without saying a word. Immediately we both began laughing at them. The absurdity of wearing jeans and boots (and a *wallet chain*) on the beach in 85-degree weather when everyone else was in beach gear was hilarious, even more so because this group had no desire in the least to be seen as funny or even fun. They *knew* they were sexy. They could kick my ass.

Fierce? I think not.

APPENDIX: NOTES FROM THE FIELD

BARNYARD LOGIC

I don't know how many of you have a farming background, but I can tell you right now that notion [gay marriage] even defies barnyard logic ... the barnyard knows better...Because if you're on a farm and you want eggs to eat and little chickens to grow into big chickens, you need a rooster and a hen.

Ohio Secretary of State J. Kenneth Blackwell concerning his speech at the Cathedral of Faith in Toledo on October 19, 2004 (*The Plain Dealer*, October 22, 2004)

The Circuit community generates its own moral values. These values, however, are often at odds with not only the Straight community but the Gay community as well.

The clash in values is situated in assumptions concerning what Michael Warner calls “heteronormativity,” social rules and expectations of what is considered normal in the heterosexual mainstream. These rules inform both Straight and Gay communities about how normal love relationships, friendships, and pleasure-seeking should be conducted. They are the basis for American family values.

I will present an outline of the heteronormative paradigm as it is understood in America today. My goal is to uncover some “barnyard logic” assumptions that inform not only anti-feminist and anti-Gay rhetoric concerning

family values but also anti-Circuit rhetoric from within the Gay community. This rhetoric has as its core a mythical scientific (pseudoscience as opposed to empirical science) cosmology that enshrines heteronormativity as an integral part of the blueprint for all of creation.

The Birds and the Bees

In terms of current American heteronormative understanding, sexual pleasure must be understood as being imbedded within two codes that dictate sexual normalcy: natural and moral. The natural code is understood to be biological and therefore scientifically verifiable. Sexuality is naturalized in a principle of universal heterosexuality that humans share with most “advanced” forms of life. This universality is commonly expressed in common parlance as “the birds and the bees” or, as Blackwell puts it, roosters and hens in his “barnyard logic.” These are code-phrases for human sexual relations that place human sexuality within the larger framework of perceived animal sexuality in order to naturalize, cosmologize, and sanctify it in its heteronormative form.

The following understanding of biology is considered axiomatic: there is a tendency for animals to manifest two sexes, a tendency that becomes more pronounced as organisms evolve to higher levels of complexity. Distinct

characteristics mark each sex. Based on observations that the two sexes in many animal species appear to have differences that are not limited to the reproductive organs, human gender is placed into a universalist framework of sexual dimorphism. Human mating (naturalized human sexual behavior) is situated in an understanding of the male as masculine (unstable, aggressive, penetrating in the sexual act, and promiscuous), while females are understood as feminine (stable, passive, receptive in the sexual act, and in need of one sex partner/provider). Proponents of this view never tire of providing examples “in nature” of animals who follow this same model in order to validate their view beyond dispute.

The moral code for sexual normalcy is based on the natural code while simultaneously seeking to rise above it. Morality is imagined as the means by which humans avoid the problems that accompany a natural way of life, that is, barbarism and chaos. The institution of marriage is seen as the means by which the unruly male is de-naturalized and domesticated in the interest of raising children in a stable environment. The woman, however, is not de-naturalized by the moral code; her natural tendencies welcome domestication. Sexual pleasure for the man is something that needs to be restricted and harnessed; for the woman, sexual pleasure is not independent of reproductive pleasures, which are associated with harmonious domestic life and child rearing.

In order to understand the dynamics of the natural and moral codes we must understand the role that men and women have in gendering each other through sexual acts. These acts mark one transition for men and women from non-gendered childhood to gendered adolescence and then to gendered maturity. When a man becomes a sexually mature in the biological sense (when his genitalia are capable of producing and delivering sperm), he does not automatically become a man in terms of his sexual identity. A woman is required to make a man out of him. This transformation is effected in two distinct moments: one that naturalizes and another that domesticates. The first moment occurs when he has sex with a woman for the first time and confirms his identity as a “natural” man.

This first transformative act is not, however, complete. It initiates the man into a life in which sex becomes a core experience by which he expresses, feels, and validates his natural masculinity (i.e. his true nature). He is then expected to spend a significant amount of time in search of more experiences or at least contemplating them. The mark of the natural man is the need for sex as many times as possible with as many women as he can. In popular jargon, such a man is a “dog,” a “wolf,” or a “stud.” The sexual act and the women that he wants are imagined as trophies, signs that he is a “real man,” desired by women and

admired by his male friends. The search for sexual pleasure is imagined as a form of warfare, and he is constantly on the hunt for more conquests.

It should be pointed out that the first moment of sexual transformation need not be based in any way upon a man's actual life history. It is not necessary to have had sex with a woman to be considered a man since such an act is not expected to be publicly verifiable. The only prerequisite is that a man must ensure that others assume that such a moment is feasible in his case. In the quotidian performance of his masculinity, he must provide sufficient clues that, in his heart of hearts, he is a dog.

The second transformative act, marriage, marks a man's transition from his true nature to the mature, civilized, and sexually domesticated man. It is not, however, expected to be completely transformative. Rather, the fully mature man rises above the natural order while still identifiable as a natural man. He adopts a veneer of civility that keeps his transgressive nature in check for the sake of domestication and, ultimately, civilization. A man in the domesticated sense of the word must tame his baser instincts for the good of his family, for future generations, and for the species. His first sexual experiences (always assumed to be heteronormal) may have been with different women, but, as a husband, he is expected to limit his future sexual activity to his wife, or wives, should he divorce and marry again.

It is assumed that his essential nature as a man never disappears, that he chafes under the domestic yoke. Such chafing, in fact, is desirable in that it validates his identity as a natural man despite the yoke. Although promiscuity for the married man is discouraged in most societies (at least officially), there is usually a “boys will be boys” attitude that accompanies transgressions, whether they be acts of “innocent” flirtation or weekly visits to a prostitute. Disruptive behavior is oftentimes tolerated and may even be expected, especially when the transgressor is intoxicated and his true nature slips out.

We can distinguish two ways in these models in which the word “boy” can be understood. In terms of the natural man, a boy is a male who is not yet sexually active. Should he reach biological and social maturity, he may “pass” as a man without having sex. But there is significant internal and external social pressure put upon him to undergo the sexual transformation as he gets older, even if there is likewise pressure from moral/religious sources for him to wait until marriage. If sex changes a boy into a man, the lack of it (or suspicion of the lack) marks him as immature, incomplete, special, handicapped, or unnatural, labels that are to be scrupulously avoided.

The undomesticated natural man is, in turn, a boy when compared with the domesticated man. When the domesticated man acts “naturally,” he may be said to be a boy as well. As mentioned earlier, natural masculine identity cannot be

erased because it is cosmically imprinted into a man's biology. There are socially acceptable times when the "boy" within the mature domesticated man is allowed to come out and play (in the literal sense of playing a sport, playing games of chance, or watching the play of professional athletes that most often are also men). A man may validate his natural masculinity by identifying with those who are assumed to be natural men, such as football players, pro wrestlers, and warriors. Confirmation of natural masculinity is really more about a man's personal and public acceptance of the myths of heteronormativity than the real-life performance of natural manhood through sport, battle, or sex. Perhaps this is especially true for the domesticated man so that, at least in his own mind, he can continue to be himself without actually breaking out of the bonds of matrimony.

The adoption of domestic identity is considered to be heroic and ultimately rewarding, but it is self-fulfillment based on sacrifice. Bachelorhood, an inferior state of being, is invariably looked upon with nostalgia because it is understood as being more fun. To be a real man in the mature sense of the word is to transcend physical pleasure rather than constantly striving to fulfill it.

This does not apply to women, however. Because sexuality is intimately associated with reproduction in the heteronormative paradigm, a woman's sexual and reproductive identities are conflated so that sexual identity as a woman is realized at the same time as reproductive fertility. In a very important way, a

woman becomes a woman by herself. To put it more accurately, her body will naturally make her a woman, independent of any man (or anyone else, for that matter), when she has her first period.

A man, on the other hand, has a sexual body but not a reproductive body. Although he contributes to the process of reproduction, he does not “have a baby,” a semantic oddity for a society that understands a child’s biological identity to be equally derived from its mother *and* father. A man’s body, with its ability to produce and deliver sperm, is almost incidental when compared to the importance placed upon his sexual impulses. A woman’s body initially makes her a woman on its own, while a man is driven to find a woman and use her body to initiate himself into manhood. Sexual pleasure for a man is inseparable from his drive for self-identity as a natural man.

This is a crucial presupposition that informs American heteronormative cosmology: The female body is the site for womanhood, manhood, and civilization. It is in the female body that womanhood begins, manhood is realized, and humanity is perpetuated. When it is reserved for one man, civilization is promoted. If, however, it is open to any man, it is a hotbed for chaos and a threat to the future of humanity. It is the most precious, and the most dangerous, thing in the universe.

For the sake of civilization, then, the body of a woman must be dedicated to the sexual drive of one man. He in turn must go against his nature and restrict his access to sexual pleasure to one woman. But what about focusing on the sexual pleasure of a woman, or objectifying the body of a man?

It is in these two sites, a woman's sexual pleasure and a man's body, that the heteronormative cosmology is silent. Women are imagined to be *naturally* procreative. Their *natural* inclination is to become mothers; therefore, they would *naturally* welcome the heteronormative moral code because it aids them in fulfilling their nesting instinct since they need help from a man in becoming pregnant and raising a family. Since sexuality is tied to reproduction, and successful reproduction leads to motherhood, the natural woman is a willing partner in domestication. There is no need for the natural woman to deny her natural propensities and transcend her true self. She becomes a *fulfilled* woman in every sense of the word when she has sex, gets pregnant, and raises a family with one man.

There is no room in this paradigm for women's sexual pleasure apart from the one-man/sex-for-reproduction model. Unlike the natural man, the natural woman is not biologically capable of being promiscuous of her own free will. If she is, then she is a perversion of nature and is in a much worse situation than that of a promiscuous man, whose natural propensities make such behavior

understandable if not laudable. This is the “walk of shame” for a woman who is seen in public, walking home the next morning in her nightclub clothes, after an evening of nonmonogamous sex. The “walk of fame,” however, applies to a man in the same situation (unless he is married and gets caught).

Implicit in the heteronormal paradigm is the notion that men are at their best when they transcend their nature, that is, when they become super-natural. The old Christian paradigm of male/spiritual and female/natural survives in this more secular cosmology, along with the notion that sexual pleasure traps men and prevents them from leaving their natural (read *sinful*) state.

In the heteronormative paradigm, a man’s body is *naturally* a non-issue; only his drive to realize himself in the sexual act with a woman is important. To focus on the body is to objectify it, and in terms of human bodies, the only body appropriate for objectification is that of a woman, just as the only proper observing subject is a man. It is in this framework that we can understand why a woman must be imagined as a woman first through her body and without the presence of a man. His drives (indistinguishable from his sexual pleasure) dictate that she must already be a woman before he can become a man.

Gay heteronormativity as homophobia

From the viewpoint of this heteronormative paradigm, the Circuit is so transgressive as to be almost incomprehensible. But an examination of some basic arguments presented against the Circuit from its critics within the Gay community will show how adaptable the heteronormative paradigm is. We will see that heteronormativity is alive and well in Gay discourse.

In Life Outside: The Signorile Report on Gay Men, Michelangelo

Signorile portrays the Circuit as the latest version of a Gay cult, a quasi-religious abomination that promotes unbridled masculinity, rampant sexuality, irresponsible sexual behavior, and self-destructive abuse of illegal drugs (steroids and “party drugs”). Signorile blames this cult for “helping to create the superhighways for a lethal virus that was finding its way into the gay world.” That virus is, of course, HIV.²⁰⁰ With advancement in AIDS treatment, the Circuit burst into the scene, reviving the nearly-dead cult and promoting a muscular body type that could hide HIV+ status as well as rejecting all signs of physical and mental maturity (68). He goes on in later chapters to link the cult of masculinity to urban Gay communities. He sees a new and healthier move out of

²⁰⁰ Signorile 61

the cities, out of the Gay ghetto, out of the cult, and into more stable monogamous relationships.²⁰¹

It is relatively easy to spot a mutation of the heteronormative paradigm lurking within Signorile's analysis. Both are cosmic in language. To imagine the Circuit as a religion is to understand it as a heretical cosmology. If we understand the natural man in heteronormative cosmology to be analogous with the Circuit boy, we can then see that the same dangers associated with immaturity and rampant promiscuity are implicit in both identities. In some ways, Signorile's caricature of the Circuit boy is the extreme version of the natural man; he constantly seeks as many sexual conquests as he can. Since the object of his desire is constantly shifting from man to man, there is nothing in the Circuit lifestyle to lead the Circuit boy to go against his true (though excessive) nature and become domesticated (read *safe*). Signorile injects HIV into the heteronormative-homosexual reconfiguration, implying that if a man is not capable of imagining the object of desire as a life mate, then he will either end up dead or living out the rest of his elderly life as a bitter old troll (a Peter Pan-esque boy who never grows up and winds up stuck in an old, unattractive body).

What is Signorile's solution to the Circuit and the warped religion that it propagates? Basically, have kids through mentoring. Signorile pleads with us: "if

²⁰¹ Signorile 246

each of us mentors just one gay kid,” he says, “... we could loosen the grip of the cult of masculinity” (Signorile 293). In addition, we could also do away with the Gay ghetto, as he calls it, the site of rampant sexuality and the source of our sorrows.

In other words, the Circuit is simply bad, no questions asked. Pleasure is deceitful, there is no such thing as responsible drug use because, just like the Straight boys in the heteronormative cosmology, intoxication leads to the baser instincts that lie at the heart of our biological identities as men. Best we move away from each other so that we are not tempted to sleep together. Sexual desire is understood as a drive, an addiction more than a site of pleasure. This drive (nature gone crazy) can lead us to do unnatural things, such as using recreational drugs, shooting steroids, and practicing unsafe sex. We must abandon such perversions and bond with one person so that we do not die from unnatural causes, including AIDS.

It is interesting how assumptions about nature are reconfigured in Signorile’s analysis. As with the heteronormative-heterosexual paradigm, there is slippage in the ways that nature is both idealized and held suspect. In the heterosexual version, men are understood to be naturally heterosexual, which is a good thing. But to remain natural is a bad thing, so men must transcend nature and hold their sexual desires captive. Homosexuality, intrinsically unnatural, is

not applauded for transcending nature because there is no connection with procreation or sacrifice.

In Signorile's version, there is such a thing as naturalized homosexuality, but it must also be tamed lest it lead to disastrous consequences that nature itself will inflict upon the chronically immature. Natural excess, if left unbridled, leads to unnatural behaviors and bodies (hypermuscular gym queens at one extreme and wasted "victims" of AIDS on the other). In a paradoxical construction that parallels the heterosexual version, unchecked natural sexual desire must be tamed so that unnatural behaviors, bodies, and communities give way to a healthier Gay lifestyle based on love between two men who are engaged in a monogamous relationship and living in the suburbs and are raising "one gay kid" apiece.

If heteronormativity is imagined as the preferred state for human communities, then, *naturally*, heterosexuality is a more ideal state than homosexuality. The best thing that Gay men can do is to approximate those social forms that are privileged by heterosexuals. Monogamy is better because it more closely approximates the heteronormative rules that govern the heterosexual community. The notion that Gay men should not cluster together in urban centers betrays a deep-seated homophobia hidden in Signorile's ideas, a fear *of* his own community masked as concern *for* that community. To assume that Gay ghettos foster an atmosphere for greater Gay promiscuity is evidence of a profound

distrust for Gay men if left to their own devices, a homophobic twist of the “boys will be boys” theme into “boys will do boys.” Signorile says that the Gay community should not be a physically locatable one; it should dilute itself by spreading out, allowing its members to become absorbed by the normal world. Life in the suburbs, surrounded by heterosexual married couples and their families, encourages Gay couples (the only acceptable model for Gay men) to enjoy the serenity that comes by incorporating heteronormative values that are the conceptual bedrock of healthy communities.

In his book, *The Trouble with Normal*, Michael Warner takes Signorile to task for his critique of the Circuit and the Gay community:

In his *Life Outside*, a jeremiad driven by resentment toward the social network he ambiguously refers to both as “the party circuit” and as “gay culture,” Signorile fuses that resentment with a common rhetoric of antiurbanism (Warner 188).

My understanding of the heteronormative paradigm and its presence in Gay discourse is modeled after Warner’s critique of normalcy in *The Trouble with Normal*. Our versions differ, however, in that he focuses primarily on the relationship between shame, stigma, and normalcy, while I picture normalcy in the framework of a heteronormative cosmology. I found that I had to modify Warner’s version (to which I am greatly indebted) to include notions of nature and the gendering of women and men. It is my opinion that, in order to

understand heteronormativity, it is impossible to tease out issues dealing with masculine identity without also examining feminine identity as well.

SHRINES TO EROS AND PSYCHE: STONEWALL AND THE SAINT 2003

The problem [for Gays] is not to discover in oneself the truth of sex but rather to use sexuality henceforth to arrive at a multiplicity of relationships. And no doubt that's the real reason why homosexuality is not a form of desire but something desirable ...

I think that's what makes homosexuality "disturbing": the homosexual mode of life much more than the sexual act itself. To imagine a sexual act that does not conform to law or nature is not what disturbs people. But that individuals are beginning to love one another — there's the problem.

Michel Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life" 308-309

Having interviewed participants and reviewed the Circuit's ritual frame in the context of folklore, religion, anthropology, and sexuality studies, let us now turn to geography and take a pilgrimage to what George Chauncey calls "the sexual topography of the Gay world" (Chauncey 23). First, I have chosen two historical landmarks in Manhattan: the Stonewall Inn and the Saint. In the following chapter, I will look more closely at the LGBT communities of Cherry Grove and the Pines on Fire Island.

The Stonewall Inn is enshrined in Gay history as the place where Gay pride has its origins. It exists today as a Gay bar/dance club, having been resurrected after a few years as a craft shop and then a bagel shop during the

eighties (Daniel Hurewitz, *Stepping Out* 7.). The second is the Saint, a dance club that many consider the birthplace of the Circuit. The Saint no longer exists.

Both Stonewall and the Saint are indelibly etched into the communal memory of the Gay male dancing tribe. These enigmatic places are remembered as sites in which new ways were fashioned for Gay men to identify themselves, relate to each other, and take pleasure in each other's company.²⁰²

In the course of this paper, I will analyze a portion of the powerful mythology that is being generated about these places. As with any good myth, the stories that the Gay community has about the Stonewall Inn and the Saint are filled with quirks, double entendres, and irony, the stuff from which the finest riddles are made. It is important to note that the depth of paradox to be found in both places is deepest when one actually visits them, either physically (as in the case of Stonewall and the Gay Liberation Monument), or through archives (the Saint was dismantled; resurrection is still pending). Understanding how the paradox is negotiated comes with visiting the communities that keep the shrines alive.

²⁰² Michel Foucault saw homosexuality as a particularly potent area for the generation of new relationships. He once stated during an interview that "I think that one of the factors of this stabilization [of sexual rights] will be the creation of new forms of life, relationships, friendships in society, art, culture, and so on, through our sexual ethical and political choices" (Foucault, *Foucault Live* 383). I submit that the Circuit offers plenty of evidence that supports Foucault's ideas.

Stonewall Inn, Christopher Park

Stonewall Inn and is arguably the single most important historical marker of the LGBT community. Kevin and I feel that Stonewall is intrinsic to our identities as Gay men. By “feel” I mean that the site is not merely a point of interest but the nexus of a cosmic wake-up call in the mythos of the Gay community, ritually replayed every summer in Gay Pride parades across the world.

On January 13, 2002, Kevin and I stopped by the Stonewall Inn on Christopher Street. Christopher Street gets its name from Charles Christopher Amos, an 18th century New Yorker who is remembered today for little more than contributing his middle name to the street in which the Stonewall Awakening occurred.²⁰³ Stonewall was not so easy to find, however, because it is situated near a tangle of streets that unravel themselves from an intersection called Sheridan Square, a “square” in name only. Christopher Park, a small triangular piece of land in the middle of the street just east of the intersection, has life-size white-washed figures of same-sex couples created by George Segal, a monument to the

²⁰³ Christopher Street is actually more famous in Germany than the US, where Gay pride celebrations are called CSD, Christopher Street Day, in honor of the first Stonewall commemoration march in NYC in 1970, entitled "Christopher Street Liberation Day."

Stonewall Awakening and the movement it started. A large, official-looking plaque commemorates this crucial moment in history when Gay people resorted to civil insurrection against the police in order to claim their rights as citizens.

The Stonewall Awakening is not the only civil insurrection being commemorated in the tiny park.²⁰⁴ Co-existing on the same triangular piece of land is a monument to General Philip Sheridan, the Union commander who drove the Confederate Army out of the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia and fought against Indians. A greenish-white statue of the General poses serenely on a pedestal in the middle of a manicured garden. The Sheridan plaque, identical in size to the Gay liberation plaque, is hung on an iron fence that separates the two memorials. Sheridan's statue is physically segregated from the space for the Gay Liberation Monument by the fence. Sheridan's plaque does not identify him as the supposed author of the infamous phrase "The only good Indian is a dead Indian" (Means, *Where White Men Fear to Tread* 420). There is no gate in the fence that links one monument to the other.

Unlike Sheridan, the "Gay" statues are at ground level. There are benches for people to sit all around them (a disheveled-looking man was sleeping on one

²⁰⁴ Christopher Street was also the site of violence during the New York City Draft Riots in 1863 in which a significant portion of the Irish population of the city murdered hapless African American men, women, and children in a four-day killing spree, July 13-17. No plaque commemorates the draft riots on Christopher St.

while we were there). Their plaque is behind them; it cannot be easily read without standing intimately close to the four figures.

I cannot help but wonder what kind of twists in history could create such an unusual juxtaposition. My first thought upon entering Christopher Park was this: What would Sheridan think about being honored on the same property as the Gay community?

Sheridan was there first, but he did not arrive alone. His statue was erected in Christopher Park in 1936, along with a flagpole dedicated to the members of the Fire Zuaves, “an elite Civil War unit that wore uniforms styled after North African tribesmen” (this is written on a small plaque by the flagpole). The Fire Zuaves were founded by Colonel Elmer Ellsworth, a short, well built, and handsome man who outfitted his men in fabulous Franco-Moroccan uniforms of his own design. President Lincoln’s secretary, John Hay, described the Zouaves as “a jolly, gay set of blackguards” (Hay 17). A personal friend of the President, Ellsworth became national celebrity for his well-drilled unit and his good looks. He was killed in Alexandria, Virginia, in 1861 by an innkeeper named James Jackson (Long 78).

According to [NYC.gov](http://nyc.gov) (“The Official New York City Web Site”), the plans for the Gay Liberation Monument in honor of the Stonewall Rebellion were submitted and approved by the city in 1982. The actual figures and plaque were

not in place until 1992, a 10-year delay due to public opposition to a Gay memorial in that space. Apparently, a significant number of people did not care to see Gay history and Civil War history honored on the same property.

An even greater irony lies in the close juxtaposition of "Stonewall" with "Sheridan". Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson, a deeply religious Confederate general, held off the advance of Yankee troops in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley until 1863, when he was accidentally shot by his own troops. Sheridan and Jackson never met on the field of battle; Jackson died a year before Sheridan was brought in to conduct the campaign for the strategic Shenandoah Valley. They both earned their places in the history books, however, in the struggle over the same piece of property.

Nowadays, the struggle is not over a broad valley but a narrow triangular patch, sandwiched between streets in Manhattan. For years I have wondered what a devoted Christian such as Thomas Jackson would think about sharing his nickname with the Gay liberation movement. It would be small comfort, I suppose, for him to know that his nickname has been imposed upon the memorial ground of his enemy.

Kevin and I went into the Stonewall Inn and had Crown Royal on the rocks. We both knew that this is the spot where Gay people refused the second-class citizenship being imposed upon them by the authorities. In itself, this is

probably nothing really new since homoerotically-inclined people had been resisting oppression one way or another (think of Whitman's poetry!) for a very long time. What makes this instance different is the way that the media took the rebellion and spread it across the country.

Something unimaginable had happened that caused the collective American psyche to simultaneously recoil in disbelief and lean forward in amazement to watch. Eros in its most forbidden form had jumped into TVs across the nation, spreading the message of liberation and social awareness on epistemological trails already well established by the likes of Malcolm X, Rosa Parks, and Rachel Carson.

As Gay men, Kevin and I revere the Stonewall Awakening as the historical moment when the mythical heart and soul of Gay identity became established. But think of what it is that we celebrate—a dance club/bar in which people searched, night after night, erotic pleasures from innumerable faces. Is it possible for a bar to be a fitting place for the veneration of men such as ourselves who have dedicated their lives to one another, especially a bar such as this one, infamous as a pick-up joint, a hang-out for transvestites of both sexes?

Yes, because it was also the only place where one could safely find fellowship and safety as well as sex. Stonewall is also the symbol of a sense of

pride that transcends sexual difference, both in terms of identity and behavior.

Michael Warner, author of *The Trouble with Normal*, describes the new ethic:

In those circles where queerness has been most cultivated, the ground rule is that one doesn't have to be *above* the indignity of sex. And although this usually isn't announced as an ethical vision, that's what it perversely is ... Sex is understood to be as various as the people who have it. It is not required to be tidy, normal, uniform, or authorized by the government ... it has its own norms, its own way of keeping people in line ... A relation with others begins in an acknowledgment of all that is most abject and least reputable in oneself. Shame is bedrock (Warner, *Trouble* 35).

Although the Stonewall ethic is no longer really new in that the movement started 30 years ago, it is nevertheless brand spanking new every time some girl or boy decides to come out of the closet. And a "girl" or "boy" they will indeed be, regardless of biological age. Social conditioning, how to dress, act, greet, and talk, is taught to the neophyte with every night on the town. All of the lofty and rightfully serious reasons for accepting one's sexual orientation tend to fade away with the intoxication of frank sexual awareness. All kinds of boundaries become waffled at that moment, especially the sexual Thou Shalt Nots that insist upon monogamous relationships, appropriately gendered dress, and suitable masculine/feminine behaviors.

But once that Gay child gets over his or her "slut phase" (if they are not too principled, too timid, or too scared by the specter of AIDS), the reality of the human condition comes back home. Once the glamour of cross-dressing, or the

thrill of being a "macho" Gay man or "lipstick Lesbian" wears off, the real lessons of sexual ethics come painfully home as they do for every one of us. Sex is no shield against loneliness. People seek security and affection from those who can be trusted, and in our society, that trust begins with one other person.

The White Saint

Unlike the Stonewall Inn, the Saint no longer exists. It opened its doors as a private club in 1980 and closed them permanently in 1988. Kevin and I were escorted by a native New Yorker, Alan Flippen, to see the sites of the Saint and its namesake, the St. Marks Baths, for ourselves. The Saint, which sits across the street from a church, is now a bank and dormitory. The Saint Marks Baths is an apartment building. There is nothing remotely relevant to their former identities in the businesses that replaced them, no plaques, memorials, nothing. It took us more than a few minutes to verify that we had indeed found the proper sites.

There are, however, Saint At Large parties in Manhattan where lovers of the Saint can gather and keep its spirit alive. In 2002, Kevin and I attended the White Party, an annual tribute to the glory days of the grand club, and the Black Party, the *fête noir* of the Circuit in both color and tone, with a black leather dress code and live sex acts.

Robbie Leslie, the last DJ ever to perform at the Saint, had agreed to spin the final six hours of the 18-hour 2002 White Party, from 10 a.m. until 4 p.m. on Sunday, February 17. We got to the party at 2:00 a.m. Sunday morning and left at 3:30 that afternoon.

Here was our chance to see, hear, and feel for ourselves the spirit of the Saint. The party was held in the Roseland Ballroom, a large but rather run-down space located at 239 West 52nd Street. The Roseland has a balcony, which, in former White Parties, had been used in the same way as the Saint's balcony.

In terms of looks and sound, the Roseland is not the Saint. The sound system was substandard; speakers tried to make up in volume what they lacked in quality—we put wads of wet napkins in our ears in order to avoid permanent hearing loss. In spite of the venue's drawbacks, the Saint At Large White Party was wonderful. Kevin and I had a blast. The music of the last two DJs, Frankie Knuckles and Robbie Leslie, was of a slower, more sensual groove than what is currently being played in the clubs and Circuit parties. Leslie played many songs that are considered Saint classics, very disco and Motown-sounding tunes that never enjoyed much airplay on popular radio stations, songs that are kept alive by the Gay male community.

We stayed at the event long enough to give our regards to Leslie, with whom I have been in contact as a source for my research. As we were leaving, I

looked around the dance floor and noticed that, by this time, pretty much all the younger men had left. The remaining crowd was older, much older in fact than I had ever seen at a party. The air was filled with memories of parties, friends, romances, sorrows, and everlasting affection, evoked by the last few songs remaining in Leslie's set. We left the darkness of the party and emerged in the middling dazzle of an overcast New York Sunday afternoon, streets full of people going about their usual Sunday business.

I have been told by those who went to the old Saint that, indeed, the White Party has its share of ghosts who attend the festivities. If any event could be considered supernatural, it would be the Saint-At-Large White Party.

The Black Saint

The 2002 Saint At Large Black Party, however, was another story. One month after the White Party, we went back to NYC for the Black Party, reputedly the most erotic of all the Circuit parties, with live sex shows and a "back room" set up on the balcony in which anything goes. Once again, the venue was the Roseland and the music was too loud. This party, however, had many more participants. It was filled with men (and some women) sharply dressed in leather and chrome, adding a degree of unexpected sophistication. The back room, while

busy, was nowhere as packed as the dance floor. Many people were there for sex; many more, however, were there to dance. In terms of energy and intensity, the frank eroticism of the Black Party seemed to capture the spirit of the Saint in its heyday more than the wistful nostalgia of the White Party.

Here is where the riddles of Saint and Stonewall merge. The safe space of the Circuit, won for us by the Rebellion and fashioned after the blueprint of the Saint, simultaneously supports and undermines the frantic, furtive, and impersonal search for gratification (and consequential shame) that marks the lives of many men with same-sex desires. Kevin and I can worry less about the hollow game of sexual conquest—it is no longer our only outlet. Why leave the dance floor for sex when more fun can be had by keeping one's clothes *on*? In the year after the Stonewall Awakening, Sue Katz wrote about the superiority of sensuality to sex:

Sensuality is something that can be very collective. Sex is private and tense. Sensuality is something you want your best friends to feel and act on with your other best friends. Sex is something you want power and territorial rights over. Sex is limited to the pants and limited by that. Sensuality is all over and grows always (Don Teal, *The Gay Militants*, 286).

Kevin and I are free to explore dance floor intimacy within these boundaries and negotiate them as we see fit. We have the added security of knowing that we always go home together. In choosing to open our relationship to the dance floor, we show our preference for the beauties of sensuality over

sexuality, a distinction which no doubt would confound many people, especially many of our Straight brothers and sisters. Our love of sensuality is an expression of affection that we can share with friends and create new friendships. It does not compromise our fidelity to each other. This is a riddle that, for us, has become an axiom.

EROS AND PSYCHE GO TO THE BEACH: FIRE ISLAND 2003

The Manhattan/Fire Island Circuit of the 1970s and '80s never died out. It got overshadowed, however, by the "second wave" trans-regional Circuit that is the focus of my research. There is still a seasonal pilgrimage of well-to-do Gay male New Yorkers, their guests, and their "boy toys" (handsome younger escorts), who flock to Fire Island from Memorial Day to Labor Day, just as they did in the days of the Saint. Any understanding of the second-wave Circuit community must include the significant role still played by Fire Island and the first, original, Circuit. After all these years, the original is still going strong.

For all of its importance in Gay folklore, the LGBT community on Fire Island is not representative of the Gay community at large. Like the Circuit before 2002, it is disproportionately small, remarkably affluent, and overwhelmingly White. There are seventeen towns on the large sand bar that comprises Fire Island and only two of them, Cherry Grove and the Fire Island Pines (with the wooded area known as the Meat Rack situated between them), are Gay resorts. There are not much more than 1000 private residences in both towns combined. Nevertheless, dancing and sexual libertinism draw hundreds of thousands of men and women from around the world to visit. Cherry Grove (with a higher percentage of Lesbians) has one dance venue (the Ice Palace) and the Pines has

three (the Pavilion, the Island Club, and, for a couple of hours during Low Tea, the Blue Whale). The uninhabited but much-frequented Meat Rack is arguably the largest “back room” in the world. It has more than ample acreage for dozens of “discreet” sexual encounters simultaneously, should people involved wish to have a bit of privacy. The beach in front of the Meat Rack (and on either side of it) is a site for nude sunbathing.

Fire Island continues to be important as a resort and a myth in both Gay and Circuit geography. Two major events on Fire Island appear on the Circuit calendar: the Invasion (Fourth of July) and the Pines Party (dictated by the tides). Four smaller events, Memorial Day, Labor Day, the New York Pride Agenda’s Rites of Summer Party in mid-August and a dragfest thrown at a residence called “Fool’s Paradise” on 495 Tarpon. DJs dream of the chance to play on Fire Island during the summer months. The Gay male institution of a “tea dance” (late afternoon-early evening socials, also popular in the Circuit) is rumored to have started there. During the summer season, there are two “tea dances” per day: “Low Tea” (5-8 pm, with dance floor and DJ) and “High Tea” (8-10 pm, not really for dancing).

What sets the Fire Island Circuit apart from the national Circuit are the ways in which the local community is enmeshed with the events. One does not just *go* to the Pines or the Grove for a Fire Island weekend; one is *invited*. Except

for the Invasion and, to a lesser extent, the Pines Party, those who have invested in the community keep tabs on who is with whom, who belongs, and who does not. Like the clientele of the Saint, the Fire Island community is pretty much members-only.

Once in, there is a sense of acceptance and social grace that I have rarely witnessed in Gay communities elsewhere. I visited Cherry Grove and the Pines in August of 2004. I was invited, often on the spot, into the homes of several prominent community members and given tours, solely because of the people I knew and the nature of my research. The isolation, small size, and expenses associated with staying in the Pines and the Grove tend to keep out a lot of people. Although most of its residents are city-folk, there is a sense of security and familiarity that is typical of a small-town setting, in spite of the fact that very few residents live there year-round. People lose their urban sense of propriety and distrust so that they can “drop in” to see each other, make eye contact, and nod to strangers.

For a study of the Circuit community, both original and second-wave, the focus would be on the Fire Island Pines, which is the site of events such as the Invasion, Pines Party, Rites of Summer, and the dragfest. But any understanding of the Pines must include its symbiotic relationship with the Grove and both communities’ relationship with nature.

Symbiosis

Cherry Grove is the oldest of the two Gay communities. As affluent Gay men flocked to Fire Island, those who were more discreet were often bothered by the openly camp attitude of many Grove residents, so they began colonizing the Straight Pines community on the other side of the woods that would become the Meat Rack. The Pines Gay community was reputed to be richer, prettier, less flamboyant, and more closeted. The Grove was seen as more inclusive, less expensive, and less pretentious. As Alan Flippen observes, “The tensions between the Grove and the Pines mirror those that have existed in the Gay community at large for decades.” I might add that many of these same tensions exist between the Circuit and the Gay community in general.

For all of their differences, however, both communities had a vested interest in keeping certain societal institutions out of their affairs. Both accepted Straight people and their families, but resisted the establishment of churches,

synagogues, and, for a long time, a standing police presence.²⁰⁵ Those Straight people who moved into these Gay enclaves were usually of the same mindset when it came to a strong distaste for official regulators of morality. A major social problem for many years was the unwanted intrusion and Gay bashing from police and the occasional Straight male hooligans.

Both communities also have serious financial, social, and spiritual investment in the environment. Fire Island is extremely ecologically sensitive. No cars are allowed in the Grove or the Pines. People get around by walking on extensive boardwalks or by catching water taxis when traveling between communities (the elderly are allowed transportation by electric cart). To eliminate the need for culling the deer population by hunting, mature does are regularly given birth control injections through darts containing immunocontraceptives. There are few sidewalks in the Pines and none in the Grove. The Pines has one dirt road running down the middle of it for service vehicles. The Grove uses motorized carts modified into miniature “fire trucks” (called “fire carts”) that can

²⁰⁵ Alan Flippen: “As for churches and synagogues, it's true that neither the Pines nor the Grove has a physical house of worship, unlike most of the larger Straight communities on the island. However, this may have more to do with land-use philosophy than anything else. The Straight towns not only have church buildings, but also many other types of non-residential property (tennis and basketball courts, more commercial businesses, even a school in Ocean Beach) that the Pines and the Grove have chosen not to allow. There have always been church and synagogue groups in the Pines, but they hold prayer services at the Community House” (personal communication, Dec. 29, 2004).

fit on the boardwalks, which are about 6' wide. The boardwalks in both communities stop at the Meat Rack. Myriad unlit sandy trails criss-cross through the Meat Rack and connect the Grove to the Pines.

I have never seen people live so close and to nature and in such harmony with it. Most houses are built with unpainted wood (many of the multimillion-dollar homes I saw in the Pines and Grove were covered with unvarnished silvery-gray cedar), and have xeriscaped yards, especially in Cherry Grove. Residents collect beach glass that has been smoothed and made opaque by the sand and sea. As a sign of the communities' ecological awareness and aesthetic, beach glass is set in pendants and worn as jewelry. The Pines has a ceremony where drag queens bless beachfront property in return for donations to the beach preservation fund.

There is a history of friction, however, between the communities. In the past, more discreet Pines residents were embarrassed at the frank faggotry of the more egalitarian Grove, and out-and-proud Grove residents were not happy with the body fascism and "Straight-acting" protocol of the Pines. Tensions eventually came to a head when a drag queen attempted have dinner at the Botel, an establishment right off the ferryboat stop in the Pines. Owned by John Whyte, who was famous for his masculine beauty and infamous for his intolerance of

camp in the still-closeted Pines, the restaurant refused her service because she was not in appropriate attire for a man. Thus began the Invasion of the Pines.

On July 12, 1976, a few days after the queen had been turned away, a group of determined friends decided to challenge the dress code. Panzi (Tom Hansen), who was crowned homecoming queen in Cherry Grove's first-ever pageant earlier that year, felt that *noblesse oblige* demanded she confront the prejudice in the Pines. Panzi and several of her friends (including at least one woman) dressed up in outrageous drag, caught a water taxi from the Grove to the Pines, and arrived in all of their splendor singing "God Bless America" at the dock in front of the usual crowd of men having cocktails at the Blue Whale. Amazed at the spectacle, the men at the bar welcomed them in and bought them drinks (Newton 268-70).

Since then, it has been a summer ritual for men and women to cross-dress and "invade" the Pines by water taxi and ferryboat on the Fourth of July. The event has grown so large (a few thousand people gather at the Pines Harbor every year for it) that it has its own master of ceremonies. Festivities include the parade of drag kings and queens, the blessing of the harbor by the Cherry Grove homecoming queen, and dancing to music spun by top Circuit DJs during two big fundraising events: Dance on the Bay and indepenDANCE.

The Pines and ROS

Other than the Invasion, there is little involvement from Cherry Grove in the Mahattan/Fire Island loop and the “new Circuit” trans-national calendar. The focus is on the Fire Island Pines.

Affairs in the Pines are more local in spirit than the typical Circuit party, a mark of continuity with the “old Circuit.” Most of the attendees are Manhattanites who rent or own residences in the Pines and their houseguests who are down for the weekend. Few people come from outside of the loop to attend.

Rites of Summer (ROS) is a Saturday afternoon-to-sunset party (a tea dance, basically) sponsored by the Empire State Pride Agenda as a fundraiser for LGBT legal concerns. I attended this event during my visit in 2004. It is held on the ocean side pool deck of a beautiful cedar-covered beachfront home. Besides the staff, there appeared to be almost nobody younger than 35. There were few women and people of color. It had its celebrities, including fashion designer Calvin Klein, who had built a house in the Pines many years before. The DJ was Roland Belmares from Texas/California.

In the Circuit, the “Fire Island sound” is music that is upbeat, “happy,” with lots of vocals and lots of “classics,” older songs that hearken back to the days of the Saint and the Paradise Garage. If a party is held during daylight hours, there

is even more of an expectation that the music be nostalgic and “light.” Roland Belmares was situated above the pool deck on the third floor of the house; he was usually visible to the dancers. As expected, Belmares played music that was well within the parameters of the Fire Island sound. The dance floor, a large wooden platform that was placed over the pool, was packed.

The Fire Island crowd (in this case, the Pines crowd and their guests, predominantly) is a difficult group for a DJ to impress. Many well-known DJs have never been invited to play there, especially if they are not perceived as having a sufficient background in the classics. Having more than its share of sophisticated and musically-savvy men, it is all too easy for DJs to “strike out.”

Many of the ROS participants were Manhattan Circuiteers who came to the Pines that weekend specifically for this event. A few hours after ROS, there would be another Circuit DJ, Tracy Young from NYC, at the Pavilion, the largest dance venue on Fire Island. In accordance with Fire Island sensibilities, people would go to ROS, go back to their houses for a late and leisurely dinner, then head to the Island Club for the “Sip and Twirl” before the Pavilion opened at around midnight. Properly speaking, that evening at the Pavilion is the continuation of ROS, as would be the Low Tea some 15 hours later at the Blue Whale.

The Pavilion (formerly the Sandpiper) is arguably the most significant Gay male dance venue in the US. Recently renovated after years of neglect, it is a comfortable, no-frills, high-ceilinged black box and a great space for the serious dancer. 600 people would pack it nicely. It sports a decent sound system and lights, as well as signature crystal chandeliers (well, it does have *some* frills). The DJ is perched high above the dance floor. People hand their coats and sweaters on pipes that run along the top of the hallway leading to the dance floor. The Pavilion is quite possibly the most coveted club in the US for a Circuit DJ to spin.

Tracy Young is known for playing hard-driving beats, not at all the in the Fire Island sound genre. True to form, she did so at the Pavilion to the delight of much of the crowd, especially the younger men and women. Some of the older, more established people in the crowd, however, were not so happy. But this is not the first time that the Pavilion has brought in a DJ that did not conform to traditional expectations.

The pavilion closed at around 5 am. No other event would happen until Low Tea at the Blue Whale, which would commence at 5 pm. In between, there would be gatherings at people's houses, breakfasts, and, as always, the Meat Rack.

Low Tea on Sunday is a tradition in which people dance and see each other off as the ferryboat takes those who must return to the real world back to

Long Island. The Blue Whale sits right on the dock where the ferryboat comes in. Its dance floor is open to the air on the dockside. On this particular Sunday, Joe Gauthreaux from New Orleans/NYC was the DJ.

The dance floor at the Blue Whale holds perhaps 300 people comfortably. It is low-ceilinged and the DJ is maybe 4 feet above the dance floor, much more visibly accessible to dancers. Unlike ROS and the Pavilion, the crowd was not as “Circuitry.” In many ways, it was much more fun, more relaxed, and more vocal. Gauthreaux played to the crowd, spinning plenty of songs with lyrics that people knew. At times, it was almost as much a sing-along as it was a dance. Everyone knew that the weekend was drawing to an end, and they wanted to finish with a bang as the ferryboat left, taking away hundreds of well-wishers at a time.

LIFE, LIBERTY, AND THE PHILADELPHIA BLUE BALL 2005

Preface: I have attended two Blue Balls: the first one in 2000 and the second in 2004. Blue Ball, sponsored by the Philadelphia Sapphire Club, is a fundraiser for Gay-related charities. I found it striking that the party was held in the Constitutional Center, so I wrote this article. In 2006, Blue Ball merged with the Equality Forum, a large LGBT festival held in May, thus shifting the party from the frigid winds of winter to the balmy days of late spring.

“You guys represent everything we stand for.”

These words were said to me in private by Jim Birch, the Director of Security at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia. He and I were standing together in the Center, which was alive with thumping music, pulsing lights, and dancing men. Mr. Birch was in a suit and tie. I was in jeans, beltless, and bare-chested. It was midnight, and Blue Ball 2005 was kicking into high gear.

Well, Circuit parties are definitely “the pursuit of happiness.”

This was the second year that Philadelphia’s only Circuit event was held at the Constitution Center, a beautiful building dedicated to the history and principles of the US Constitution. Ironical, since so many people are pushing for a constitutional amendment that would establish GLBT folk as second-class citizens.

With all of the bad press that Gays are getting these days, not to mention the hearty bashing that the Circuit has weathered over the last two years, it is

amazing that Blue Ball still exists. It is even more amazing that Circuit queens would be seen as shining examples of what is good in America by people like Jim Birch, a middle-aged Straight man.²⁰⁶ Obviously, Blue Ball is doing something right.

One glance at its advertising and we can see that Blue Ball is a class act. Instead of half-naked hotties giving “come hither” looks, Blue Ball 2005 used a Bolshevik-era theme (Unite!) with a built but fully-dressed man waving a flag with the Blue Ball logo in the upper quadrant. No doubt the lack of sexual innuendo makes it easier to work with a conscientiously nonpartisan venue such as the Constitution Center.

Doctor Mark Blecher, President of the Sapphire Fund (the charitable organization that throws, so to speak, the Blue Ball), said that many Circuit parties have lost sponsors due to fears that the Circuit encourages irresponsible sexual behavior and intoxication. He and his staff have developed strategies to ensure that Blue Ball keeps both sponsors and Circuiteers happy. Blue Ball is a blueprint for other parties to follow.

Mark greeted me (and hundreds of other people) when I arrived at the event. He said that there were 60 to 70 volunteers that night. Some of them were

²⁰⁶ Personal interview with Jim Birch, January 29, 2003. In order to quote Birch, I had to get permission from the National Constitution Center first. The Center is a nonpartisan institution, so anything I quoted from its representatives had to be approved in order for the Center to maintain political neutrality.

Straight and had never been to a Circuit party. All of them were pleasant, even enthusiastic. A key element of their training, Mark told me. Attitude from the staff was refreshingly absent.

With leadership like Blecher's, no wonder.

I was introduced to Dominic Galleli, chief of security. A strikingly handsome man, Dominic was dressed in black (the uniform of the all-volunteer Blue Ball security staff). He showed me a square of red glow sticks taped to his right forearm. The red light on his person is an effective reminder to people that they are in a public space and that not *everything* goes. "If you look around the building, you'll see that we are a visible presence," he said, referring to the buffed cadre of men in black who worked with him.

But it was a discreet presence. These guys were not bouncers. I asked Dominic if he considered himself to be a policeman or a lifeguard. His response: "Neither. I am a protector." His people were there to help, not confront.

There were also "lifeguards" as well as "protectors." Doctor Chris Mann from Dallas and his red-shirted MedEvent staff were on duty that evening, ready to aid those in need. Chris has put together a crew of doctors, nurses, and EMTs from the Circuit community who volunteer their time to provide professional care for anyone with health issues. The unsung heroes of the Circuit world, MedEvent has been asked to help with almost every major party. Like Mark and Dominic,

Chris is able to command the loyalty of his volunteers through clear directives, sympathetic response, and personal charisma.

For both Dominic in Blue Ball security and Chris in MedEvent, the key to a successful party lies in the expertise that comes from people familiar with the scene. They did not act as if it were a typical Gay bar setting or (shudder) a typical testosterone-pumped Straight male crowd. Intimate but not intrusive involvement allows their respective staffs to interact with a personal touch.

That personal touch extended into the evening's performances, which included two rounds of free bottled water and beach balls with maps of the world and the constellations on them. Even the DJ reached out. Right in the middle of the event, Tony Moran came down from the heights of the DJ booth for a live vocal performance (he sang "The Promise").

Mark's staff, Dominic's security people, the MedEvent medics, and Tony Moran looked like they were enjoying themselves. At times, they were even dancing. Now, *that's* a party!

The next day, Mark reported that Blue Ball 2005 had no arrests and not one ambulance call.

Granted, the numbers at Blue Ball (and every other Circuit party) are down about 30% from its heyday in 2000. We are witnessing a smarter, leaner

Circuit scene in which participants are treated with more respect, but are likewise required to carry themselves responsibly.

We all know by now that, had the Circuit scene kept going the way it did (and sometimes still does), it would self-destruct. Thanks to people like the Blue Ball volunteers and their leaders, we still have the chance to represent everything our Constitution stands for.

Blue Ball is produced by members of the Sapphire Fund, a volunteer GLBT organization. Established in 2002, the Fund is an outgrowth of the long-standing annual Blue Ball fundraising event, which was first held in 1991.

BLACK AND BLUE 2006: BAD BOYS NEED FIERCE GIRLS

(Published in *Outlook Weekly* Nov. 29-Dec. 6)

Preface: Black and Blue is the largest Gay Circuit party in North America. Started in 1991 by the Bad Boys Club Montreal, it has set the pace for the rest of the Circuit. I had not managed to attend the Black and Blue weekend until 2006. The following is an article that I wrote about B&B and women's involvement.

This October, I went to Quebec's big AIDS fundraiser, Black and Blue, to see for myself what the Bad Boys Club Montreal (BBCM) had created.

Black and Blue (B&B) is now my favorite Circuit event. The staff is professional and friendly. The party is visually stunning, sound and music are superb, and tickets are reasonably priced. Montreal is a joy to visit.

But life in Montreal is not always easy. Quebec is a province under pressure. Its French heritage is constantly barraged by the rest of English-speaking Canada and the gigantic monolingual presence of the US.

In the Village (the Gay ghetto of Montreal), I saw young homeless people milling about, some sleeping in doorways. Many of these kids do not speak English very well, a huge liability in a land whose population must be adept at English in order to stay economically competitive.

For the B&B weekend, however, tensions are relaxed. The city rolls out its best blue carpet for visitors from the US, Europe, and the rest of Canada.

The Bad Boys of the BBCM don't do it all by themselves. I saw plenty of fierce girls standing with them. Together, they are magnificent.

Here are three shining examples of feminine compassion and intelligence, Montreal style.

Bad Boy Caroline

Caroline Rousse is in charge of promotion and media relations for the BBCM. 12 years ago, she was the first Straight woman in the organization.

"I think that women have a different way of thinking and reacting than men," she said. "I think that I probably brought my different way of seeing things into this organization.

"One of my first goals when I arrived here was to make sure that we involved everyone and that the Black & Blue was an event for all, including the heterosexual clientele. Since one of our goals was to raise money for people with AIDS, the idea was that 'AIDS doesn't discriminate; it concerns us all, so let's have everybody at this party.'"

The BBCM has achieved that goal. About half the attendants are Straight.

And the Straight boys and girls sure are fun. Montrealers are a sophisticated bunch, but not in a stuffed-shirt way. At the main event, I noticed that Straights outshone Gays in playful yet elegant fashion excellence.

And they were so well-behaved! There was no friction between sexual orientations. Sometimes the Straight men would good-humoredly flirt with the Gay men. I saw a cute Straight dude (with his girlfriend) joke with a Gay male couple: “Watch out—I might try to take him from you!”

Caroline attributes the friendly vibe of B&B to its location: “Montreal is a party city, and Montrealers are very open-minded. The multiculturalism, the European side of Montreal mixed with its American side, the French and the English... these are all aspects of our city that make it a very unique place, perfect for our Black & Blue.”

No doubt about it: B&B is a Gay event. But all are welcome, thanks to people like Caroline.

Mother Lyne

Lyne Boulé has tremendous unofficial status with the BBCM and the Gay community in the Village. She is called “the Mother of the Village” because of her selfless devotion to people with AIDS.

“It’s hard for me sometimes,” she admitted. Lyne has lost many friends to the disease. Each death takes its toll on her. At the same time, she is even more determined to help people avoid becoming HIV+.

Lyne’s devotion to AIDS awareness and compassion for the stricken comes from her own time of trouble. When she was raped years ago. It was her Gay male friends that helped her through the trauma.

Nowadays, she is sort of a good luck charm. When Gay men are nervous about getting tested for HIV, they ask her to accompany them in hopes of a negative result. It seems to work.

This does not mean, however, that she will let them off the hook for questionable sexual behavior. One of her friends recently informed her that he might have seroconverted. “I was a bit mad, you know,” she said.

But, like a good mother, her anger cools and she does what she can to help. Her adopted children know that she will always be there.

Lyne has two biological children that are well-versed in compassion and awareness. Her son told her that the kids in school were ignorant about AIDS, so she got some of her HIV+ friends to speak at his school. “Children need to talk with someone who has been there,” she said.

She has also become an icon in the Gay male party scene by being there for DJs. I first saw Lyne in the DJ booth at the B&B Military Ball with a rising

young star named Patrick Guay (pronounced “Gay”). She counts Stéphan Grondin, Peter Rauhofer, Victor Calderone, and Paulo among her friends.

Her work with the community has earned her a place in Gay men’s hearts that transcends gender. Club Parking in Montreal has nights for men only, but Lyne is welcome. The management at Parking has let her know that, in their eyes, she is an honorary Gay man.

Big Sister Kat

Another honorary Gay man is Kat Coric. We danced together to the music of Junior Vasquez at Club Parking’s men-only B&B Leather Ball. She was the only woman there.

Kat started out in BBCM with the Bad Boy Club dancers. A few years ago, she suggested that they do an annual art auction. The BBCM created a position for her.

She developed the Health Education Campaign and founded the Black & Blue Annual Art Exhibition & Auction, the first of its kind within the Circuit (now in its 11th year).

Kat mixed art, humor, and health awareness to capture people's attention with eye-catching posters and flyers promoting safer sex and partying. The ad campaigns of the BBCM are models for Circuit parties everywhere.

I noticed posters during the B&B weekend informing people with AIDS that refrigerators were provided on the premises for medications. Since functions can go for 6-8 hours, HIV+ participants can party with their friends as long as they wish without skipping their vital meds schedule. Kat got this service started.

A celebrated artist in Montreal and New York, Kat often gears her talents toward harm prevention in the party scene. In 2000, she did two memorable posters about crystal meth with graphic artist Charles Henri. One was a picture of Tina Turner that said, "The Only Good Tina" and the other was a photo of a long-stem crystal glass with "Crystal Is Better at Tiffany's."

Although she is no longer on the BBCM staff, Kat supports the organization whole-heartedly. She continues to donate her art to AIDS fundraisers. This year, she volunteered once again to be a BBCM dancer for Black and Blue.

This quote from Kat sums up what she, Lyne, Caroline, the Village, and the BBCM accomplish during that one weekend in early October:

The Black & Blue Main Event has always been Montreal's crown jewel of parties. Everyone works with one common goal: to make a party that will linger in the minds and souls of all who witness it. When everyone is dancing, bathed under the sumptuous lights, amid the backdrop of the

Olympic Stadium, it doesn't matter if you are Straight or Gay or skinny or fat. Everyone is there to celebrate, to dance, to have fun...That's what life should be.

Amen to that.

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