The Fierce Tribe

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Introduction: Fascists and Whores

For too long, we [Gay men] have lied about our best selves....
By rote we rag about too many drugs, moan over meaningless sex, complain over too many muscles and too much competition, censure the circuit, decry shallowness, bitch over body obsession ... muscles (bad), too much sex (bad), too little sex (bad), circuit and [illegal] substances (bad and worse), barebacking! (REALLY bad) ... and oh, did I mention body fascism?

—David Nimmons, The Soul Beneath the Skin (214)

The Circuit, a series of dance parties where thousands of shirtless men get inebriated, flirt, and dance with each other, caters to a community full 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. Like most stereotypes, they reflect a facet of the truth. Although narcissism and illegal drug use² have never been prerequisites for membership, and not everybody in the Circuit is a body fascist and/or a crack whore, these stereotypes give critics of the Circuit plenty of reasons to condemn it.

As a playground for body fascists and crack whores, the Circuit 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 throes of ecstatic rapture. These fascists and whores are not violent, even though they might be more muscular, do more drugs, and be much more sensual in public when compared to the average man. In much of Straight male culture, muscle equals potential to inflict physical harm, drugs are associated with thugs, and sex is an incentive to fight with potential rivals. The spirituality of the Circuit subverts these basic masculine premises.

My research has an agenda: I am appalled by the wars, terrorist acts, riots, drive-by shootings, physical assaults, and infatuation with violence that my fellow men consider to be essential to performances of masculinity. If many men have to be excessive (a human trait that is culturally gendered), and if the expression of masculine excess must

1. Unprotected anal sex.
2. Every Circuit event without exception discourages illegal drugs.
be transgressive (what I call *outlaw*), the men of the Circuit have discovered a way to eliminate the violent dimension that too many guys enter when they express their manhood. The Circuit community has social dynamics that could help eliminate much of the violence that men perpetrate across the globe every day in the name of Heaven and their *cojones*.

There are many outlaw communities (a blanket term for any community that depends on transgressive behavior for its identity) engaging in performances of masculinity that generate pleasures associated with spiritual experiences, even when the groups are avowedly secular. Some of the most violent communities are extralegal and set apart from civic law, such as the armed forces. Others are illegal, such as terrorists. The Circuit is somewhere in between, a nonviolent outlaw community with its own peculiar spirituality based on dance, rhythm, sensuality, hilarity, altered states of consciousness, and being Gay. 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 associated with Gay men in general, 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 appealing to both Gay and Straight men. The Circuit generates behaviors, relationships, and ethics that could reduce violence on a global scale if all men learned to adopt them: muscle as overwhelmingly attractive rather than threatening, arrogance and vanity expressed through disdain rather than physical aggression, masculine signifiers of violence as accessories for sexual pleasure, ethical management of sado-masochistic tendencies, informed awareness of certain illegal intoxicants rather than their prohibition, and social bonding through appreciation for shared hilarity. 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.

Claiming and reporting spiritual experiences situated within a distinctly non-religious and carnivalesque frame such as the Circuit can be problematic. Profound spiritual experiences on the dance floor are not enough to inspire the Circuit community to look beyond the next party. Although many of the events are fundraisers, there is no organized agenda for the betterment of humankind. A significant minority of Circuit participants will consistently exhibit blind, brute cruelty akin to fascism when dealing with those that they consider less beautiful. 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 or restrain their drug use.

Nevertheless, the shallowness of the Circuit community does not negate the fact that many participants are irrevocably changed by their experiences, even when they behave like body fascists and crack whores. The Circuit is not a religious revival or political movement, but it does provide a performance frame for intensely personal relationships with humanity and the cosmos. Within that frame, participants have experiences of transcendence as they bond together that just might have religious and political ramifications in their lives. It is up to the participants, however, to judge whether these experiences are indeed real or simply temporary fantasies.

One of the most important ingredients in the production of the spiritual experiences in the Circuit is unpredictability. 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.

It is important that the Circuit not become too disciplined. It must not be too predictable, too safe, too sober, too political, too religious, 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 the usual rules of propriety in the safe space of a Circuit party just so they discover their own limits.

The self-affirming lessons of the Circuit and moments of deeply spiritual connection to the universe are tied to the disciplined performance of vanity, drug-induced insanity, and sensuality. 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 profound awareness of one’s own frailties, the limitless capacity of the mind to create illusion, and appreciation of moderation in the face of seemingly unregulated pleasure. Perhaps the most important thing that people learn is this: just because you can do something doesn’t mean that one should.

Positive lessons come from the premium placed 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 notion that arrogance, intoxication, and sensuality in the Circuit can lead to self-improvement when embodied in communal dance fascinates me. 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.