The Fierce Tribe

Weems, Mickey

Published by Utah State University Press

Weems, Mickey.
The Fierce Tribe: Masculine Identity and Performance in the Circuit.
Utah State University Press, 2008.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/9421.

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Chapter 3

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 dance for pleasure understand each other, in much the same way that people all understand what it is like to breathe.

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. I never dance alone, even when I am by myself. But I do not dance professionally.

Popular dance has more to teach us about ourselves as interactive social beings than professional dance because more of us dance recreationally, and we love it so much we do it for free. For those of us who are profoundly sonically driven, we will 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 most people who attend Circuit parties find that the benefits of having a good time on the dance floor go far beyond taking their shirts off and making “friends” while on drugs.

The Circuit is part of the larger underground dance music scene. This larger scene includes Raves and annual gatherings such as the Winter Music Conference in Miami and Burning Man in the Nevada
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All of these communities and events promote ecstatic communal bonding through dance.

Understanding the social forces in dance cultures such as the Circuit is not easy because dance itself has not been adequately investigated. Since popular dance is often associated with intoxication and sexual irresponsibility, many societies consider it excessive, mindless, and bordering on the indecent.\(^1\) In academia, popular dance usually takes a back seat to formal dance, such as ballet, tap, modern, and officially recognized forms of folk dance. College dance departments tend to be

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1. 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.”
more concerned with the production of stage performance than understanding nonprofessional dance, which usually falls in the domain of anthropologists and folklorists. Neither anthropologists nor folklorists, however, have developed workable language to deal with how or why humans move together to rhythm.

The excessive dancing and revelry of the Circuit make it a target for moral watchdogs within the Gay community. Critics such as Michelangelo Signorile blame Circuit parties for an assortment of 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.

The history of the Circuit is that of an outlaw community (Gay men) that uses ethically suspect activities (communal dance, sex, and intoxicants) to create new social norms privileging tolerance, nonviolence, altered states, and festival. 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 masculine 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, and, of course, Michelangelo Signorile, who all agree (at least on this one point) that the Circuit is oversexed, overdosed, 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.

At least one of the critics frames the Circuit in terms of spirituality, albeit phony spirituality. In *Life Outside*, Signorile calls the Circuit an “Evangelical Church,” established upon the “sacraments” of steroids and club drugs, that preaches “the cult of masculinity” (131–32, 76, 31). 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

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2. 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).
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 will continue to promote its virtual [italics in the original] 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.” (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…. (Trouble 32)

Circuit boys are a condemned community within a condemned community, a twofold example of what Erving Goffman calls a “spoiled public identity” (Stigma 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 simply as stigmatized is not accurate. The term “outlaw,” referring to the nonconformist, the undisciplined transgressor, one who rejects societal norms and takes risks rather than one who is unfairly oppressed, is just as applicable.

For many men, outlaw identity is an important marker for masculinity. Straight men base their peculiar obsession with pirates, bank robbers, and rowdy rock stars 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
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is a love/hate relationship between the Gay male community and the Circuit, not unlike the attraction/repulsion Gay men feel toward strippers and porn stars, except that strippers and porn stars tend to carry more status than Circuit boys.³

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 tremendous anxiety.

There are other reasons why the Circuit is not simply a stigmatized community. Societal rules are not the same for Straight men and Gay men, and Gay spaces tend to be used differently than Straight spaces.

Straights are likely to treat Gay men differently because they perceive them 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. 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.

Homophobia, usually portrayed as the bane of Gay society, allows the Circuit a degree of privilege by generating the “Gay bubble,” an invisible force field around Gay public spaces. Here is an example: my husband Kevin Mason and I attended the Miami Winter Party 2003, an open-air, daytime Circuit event by the ocean in South Beach. The only thing separating the party from the rest of the beach was a thin plastic sheet about a meter and a half tall. I have seen men, 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.

This same homophobia keeps many Straight male law enforcement officers away from Gay male establishments and Circuit parties. Straight male anxiety about overt homosexual behavior, especially in spaces where the presence of so many Gay men changes social rules of sensual propriety, have served to protect Gay male spaces from unwanted attention. As Gay men gain greater acceptance, however, the bubble is becoming less effective as a barrier.

The Circuit community is an increasingly visible outlaw community that exhibits the extralegal privilege of the soldier as well as the illegal

³ 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.
rejection of the rule of law of the criminal. By “extralegal,” I mean the status of those groups who act outside of the civil code without censure, such as soldiers in the theater of war. The higher income and education level of Circuit participants, the care of the self that leads to enhanced physical beauty and muscle, and the fact that many events raise money for charities—all these factors reduce public censure of Circuit outlaws that other, less attractive, outlaws face. Add the lack of violence and the Gay bubble, and the average Circuit boy or girl has the potential to live in harmony with society rather than in conflict with it.

But that harmony can be disrupted when drug addiction, sexual irresponsibility, and unbridled vanity attract negative media attention. When allowed to proceed unchecked, transgression and excess can undermine whatever magic there might be when one spends a weekend with thousands of dancing Gay men.
NYC/Miami  
January 2008

While my family was busy running amusement parks in Long Island, I was growing up in the New York nightclub scene of the ’80s. The Saint, the Limelight, and the Factory were my homes. The 1999 Winter Party in Miami was my first real Circuit event. It was also the first time I ever flagged. Over the last decade, flagging has become my passion. My husband, Shane Rogers, and I have worked with different Circuit events such as ReUnion in Disney–Orlando and White Party–Miami. We also produce JustCircuit.Mag and its Web site.

The Circuit is growing, changing, moving, and adjusting. Newcomers to the Circuit don’t remember the Fire Island Pines parties or the trance music era. They’ve never heard of DJ Susan Morabito or Red Party in Columbus, Hotlanta in Atlanta, or Fireball in Chicago. Just as our parents pushed American History down our throats in grade school so that we in America won’t repeat the past, it is our job to remind these newbies of what was good so that we can repeat the past and make the parties even better. We should educate those new to the Circuit scene with all that is good about an event weekend that allows responsible boys and girls to “let their hair down” and to, among other reasons, raise money for those who only wish they could join the party, but can’t because of AIDS.

Let’s face it. Paying hundreds and thousands of dollars to dance and play all weekend long at a Circuit weekend might not be for everyone. But for those of us who have experienced the Circuit’s magic and have established and maintained friendships that are far from phony along the way, the very idea of protecting the Circuit is an honorable one. I for one will continue to pay the big bucks, dress up like a club kid, make a grand entrance to the main event, dance, flag like a wild man to the music and DJs that I love to hear, and feel good about it all until the end. I will do it responsibly, and I will do it all in moderation. And when I’m doing it for a good cause, I’ll pat myself on the back and mark my calendar for next year’s event.