The Fierce Tribe

Weems, Mickey

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Chapter 14

Stepping Out

Some of the dancers are on drugs and enter the discotheque with the radiant faces of the Magi coming to adore the Christ Child; others, who are not, enter with a bored expression, as if this is the last thing they want to do tonight. In half an hour they are indistinguishable, sweat-stained, ecstatic, lost.

—Andrew Holleran, Dancer from the Dance (115)

Ecstasy\(^1\) is the common goal for those who wish to push things outside of their normal boxes, including themselves. Although most societies allow some form of ecstatic expression, undisciplined ecstasy is often considered dangerously excessive because it may lead to transgressive behavior. Substances and behaviors that produce ecstasy are often closely policed or even banned to ensure that chaos does not spill out and undermine the political and religious institutions that guarantee stability and safety. But there are always undisciplined 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 promote, such as the military, and in ways that their societies find problematic, such as terrorists and Circuiteers.

\(^1\) The *American Heritage College Dictionary* defines ecstasy 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” (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.” Its older Greek root, *ekstasis*, means “astonishment, distraction.” The actual word-blocks that make it up are ex (out of) and stasis (standstill). 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.
In order to better understand the nonviolent spiritual masculinity of Circuiteers, I will compare it with the holy bond that unites people in terrorist organizations, and explore further the sacred *esprit de corps* of soldiers.

_Fierce Solidarity_

Circuit folk spirituality involves the secular performance of ecstatic communal dance. In this context, “ecstasy” may be defined as a key ingredient for the production of transcendent solidarity. As mentioned earlier, I call this particular Circuit phenomenon “fierce solidarity” to include a folk term (fierce) in a playful manner that reflects humor and the premium placed on self-affirmation in the Circuit. Because the Circuit community resists religious codification, participants are free to interpret their experiences as ecstatic beings according to the cosmology of their choice, or no cosmology at all.
The Circuit possesses its own undisciplined folk spirituality as an ecstatic practice without, as Barbara Walker Lloyd puts it, an “institutionally sanctioned and codified doctrine” (6). As mentioned in the Preface, it is not what David Hufford would call a spiritual belief because there is no prerequisite that one believe in non-corporeal spirits (“Beings” 15). In the Circuit, the spirits they honor are their own.

This understanding of Circuit spirituality undermines the distinction between the secular and the spiritual. A remarkable amount of spiritual expression in America occurs in settings not regulated by religious institutions and not necessarily premised upon a belief in spirits. This includes homespun memorials such as small roadside shrines for traffic accident victims and massive impromptu memorials of letters, flowers, candles, and memorabilia, such as the one at the former site of the World Trade Center towers. The World Trade Center shrine was a spatial frame that allowed for religious and non-religious performances of remembrance. Atheists were just as free to post their grief as anyone else. Secular spirituality² refers to 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. 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 it. In this new ethico-spiritual discipline, diversity in expression beautifies rather than divides. Circuit spirituality is one of those secular spiritual folkways.

The Circuit is ritual performance, but ritual with a Gay twist. Since Gay people come from so many ethnicities, traditional LGBTQ performance rituals (such as coming out, Pride parades, drag shows, women’s music festivals, and AIDS quilt displays) encourage a broad range of individual and cultural expression within an agreed-upon communal frame. Unlike the script, which is purposely undisciplined, the setting is codified. Self-determination, individual expression, and cultural diversity become sacred and are key ethical elements. Internal contradictions that come with multiculturalism and undermine it (some cultures have well-defined performances of enmity against other cultures) are downplayed within the Gay context. Conflict is considered tacky.

² 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 theistic and non-theistic transcendence and encounter with the sacred—the Universe, the Author(s) of the universe, the ground of self in relation to all things, and shared humanity at its most basic level—can co-exist.
Rituals are often understood to be formal affairs with clearly defined scripts. However, in *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, Catherine Bell states 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’" (92–93).

By ritual performance, I mean that ritual is *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” (9). Much of performance is recognized by its frame more so than its content. One example of the symbolic nature of the performance frame is the groundbreaking ritual, when a shovel is ceremoniously pushed into the earth to symbolically 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 fictitious drama (Bell 42–43). But ritual-as-drama is not fiction, even if the ritual invokes the unprovable and unbelievable. Ritual connects people to and defines people within the real, not make-believe, universe. The use of make-believe in its more elevated status as fabulous myth does not necessarily take away from the reality of ritualized encounter with the universe. Myths are designed to teach real truths. People need not believe that myth is fact for it to help them encounter, interpret, and change the world around them. 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” (141). In this ultimate coherence, ritual quickens myth. Ritual allows human beings to participate in epic myth-history as they cosmically situate themselves.

A ritual’s spiritual importance depends upon how intense and intimate the encounter is between the performer of ritual and the universe that witnesses the performance. Religious codification of the script is secondary. When performers ritually encounter the state (e.g., a flag-raising ceremony), a deity (prayer), the dead (bringing flowers to a grave), another person (a handshake), or their own self-awareness (contemplation), their actions are spiritual to the degree in which the encounter situates the participants face-to-face with a cosmos that is likewise aware of them.

Nonfictional encounter is what makes ritual different in kind from a Broadway play because the premise of theater-based performance is its fictional framework. If one takes into account, however, that the best performances of fiction tend to assist people in their own spiritual
quests (as per the aesthetic philosophy of Abhinavagupta3), an adroitly performed theatrical piece behaves as if it were ritual. Devotees of stage plays such as Rent, Madame Butterfly, or The Lion King attend those performances in order to experience their ritual power when the truths invoked by the performance transcend the fictional quality of the script, which is the hallmark of a great performance as opposed to a mediocre one. The highly ritualized performance of opera and noh (including the behavior of the performers and the aesthetic expectations of the audience) would most certainly place an outstanding performance into the realm of ritual, and therefore would count as theatrical frames for spiritual expression. If a performance is undertaken as a symbolic act embedded in a cosmic narrative designed to effect transformation (with all the theatricality that such an embedded act implies), then it is ritual performance, even when situated in a fictional dramatic frame.

Goffman also uses a superbly applicable term: “team,” which is one or more performers in a performance (Presentation 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.

Terrorism, war, and Circuit parties have dramatic ritual frames involving outlaw masculine identities, transgressive behaviors, and transcendent team solidarity that help men situate themselves in the cosmos.

**The Transformative Ecstasy of Religious Terrorism as Human Sacrifice**

The purpose of war is victory over enemies. When people die 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 many of its adherents as holy war, modern terrorism reflects many of the properties of a different religious drama: human sacrifice.4

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3. Abhinavagupta was a tenth-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 ... 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” (35).

4. Juergensmeyer discusses the link between religious terrorism, theater, and human sacrifice in Terror in the Mind of God (165–71). My discussion is designed to further
Among the many examples in history of religious ritualized violence within a theatrical narrative, human sacrifice in pre-colonial Meso-America stands out as particularly instructive. The production of victims occurred in a complex cultural matrix involving warfare, sports, theater, religious ritual, politics, national security, manliness, masculine beauty, and personal status. The epistemological basis of these rituals was grounded on theologies of divine incarnation and resurrection.5

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 reenact cosmic dramas of conflict where the gods themselves were sacrificed. The reenactments were linked closely to warfare and sports, and the emotional incentive for human sacrifice was fear of greater destruction. According to Alison Futrell, author of Blood in the Arena,

The Mexica ... 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. (172)

The Aztecs held games in which human sacrifice played an important part in the closing ceremonies. After ritual games played between two teams, players would be sacrificed. These games were supernaturally powerful and could be oracular; the outcome might determine a course of action for the rulers of a community (Noble 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

show the epistemological link between human sacrifice, terrorist rhetoric, and popular American discourse on the soldier-as-hero.

5. 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 134–37). 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 may have made the wholesale conversion of Central America to Catholicism much easier because it was similar to Meso-American spirituality.
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” (172).

These rituals were high theater, 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” (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 prisoner-gods (Pizzato 32).

Before the sacrifice, victims were often treated well and showered with popular devotion as the gods they were chosen to represent. Honor was not directed to the victim per se 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/became. After the sacrifice, he would wear the victim’s skin, simultaneously personifying 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. All forms of human sacrifice in Rome were formally declared illegal in 97 BCE (Kirsch 54) except the gladiatorial games, which were originally sacred rituals of mortal combat to honor newly dead nobility or to thank the gods for a victory with offerings of slain warriors. The popularity of the games turned them into grand 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). The gladiatorial ludi\(^6\) were also a means for social advancement for those who sponsored them, as well as strong political statements testifying to the might of the ever-expanding empire. The biggest difference between Meso-America and Rome was that gladiator heroes were rewarded with their lives and occasionally their freedom.

Futrell describes the politics of 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

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\(^6\) State religious celebrations, which included sports, jugglers, animal acts, and theater (Kuritz 43)
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. (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.

The importance of blood in the sacred performance of human sacrifice calls to mind the blood sacrifices of animals in other religions, including Candomblé. There is one profoundly important difference between blood offerings involved with human sacrifice and those involving the ritual slaughter of animals in classical African religion: blood sacrifice in Candomblé is not performed as a means for producing victims who suffer for the sanctity of the ritual. It is undertaken so that the axé present in the living blood of animals may be transferred to objects, spirits, and congregants for whom the ritual is enacted, and so that the meat of the animal could be prepared as food for gods and mortals. Like casualties in war (and the culinary demands of the kitchen for meat dishes), the suffering of animals is an unfortunate byproduct, not a desired element of the spiritual performance or the menu.

On the other hand, religious terrorists share Meso-American and Roman values in which human sacrifice is ethically permissible and even necessary. In Terror in the Mind of God, Mark Juergensmeyer states that acts of religious terrorism are performances of sacred drama designed to make symbolic political statements and transform the world:

The very adjectives used to describe acts of religious terrorism—symbolic, dramatic, theatrical—suggest that we look at them not as tactics but performance violence … they are dramas designed to have an effect on the several audiences that they affect. (124)

This audience is now global:

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, religious 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 they frame acts of terrorism as selfless sacrifice that must include the dramatic execution of unwilling victims. Terrorists often include themselves as willing victims who die in the terrorist performance, thus perpetuating a mythos of sympathetic identification with victims akin to the Aztec captives-as-gods, the Roman gladiators-as-heroes, and religious martyrdom.7

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 for the audience sponsoring the performance and the men who kill. Once the people in charge acquire a taste for these pleasures, they mandate the performance of terrorism-as-sacrifice with regularity. We need only look at the popularity of bombing civilian targets and secret torture in our own contemporary cultures, two forms of terrorism now found across the globe.

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 fighting a war. 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.”

Nations label human sacrifice as inappropriate and evil, even as they justify doing it themselves. They usually frame the bombing of civilians and torture as outlaw behaviors outside of expected ethical norms. Institutions that sponsor such activities take great pains to hide the terrorist activities they covertly promote. When caught engaging in terrorist activities, governments will either denounce their own operatives as rogue players or frame such outlaws as heroes and their terrorist performances as appropriate acts of defense within the rule of law, or at least within the extralegal rules of war.

Keep in mind that, in many fundamentalist religious communities, the fanatical terrorists that emerge from their midst are seen as

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7. Not all terrorists are religious terrorists. But the notions of theocracy and holy war are readily exchangeable with other non-theistic ideologies based on intimate cosmologies grounded in racism, ethnic cleansing, the march of history in communism, and even democratic principles when used to excuse and condone the production of victims and the perpetuation of vendetta.
illegal 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 transgressive behavior sanctifies them even further because they follow a higher authority and are thus absolved of guilt. They step out of line to do the hard things that most societies do not condone. As such, they are divinely extralegal soldiers and above the rule of earthly law, Heaven’s own rebels whose actions come from pushing the fundamentalist beliefs of their source communities (including fanatical secular patriotism, communism, democracy, and racism) to their logical extremes.

Terrorist acts fulfill the criteria previously mentioned for ritual. They are often full of heavy symbolic value attached to the target and the date of the attack. Terrorist performance can be highly theatrical, involving costumes and props (especially important in the production of pre-sacrifice videos in which the warrior-martyr gives a last will and testament), and the designation of a location for the “staging” of the act that signifies a dramatic encounter set within a much bigger cosmic-mythical narrative. The terrible face-to-face immediacy of a bombing, execution, or torture session is a horrific, nonfictional drama that is cloaked, buffered, and sanctified by a strong sense of divine justice.

Juergensmeyer gives an example of such a sanctified dramatic frame in a warrior-martyr video starring a young Palestinian man:

The mission he and his friend would carry out involved plastic explosives, either strapped around his waist or carried in a knapsack, but he was portrayed holding a gun—most likely included in the video to give him a martial demeanor.8 “Tomorrow is the day of encounter,” the smiling boy said ... he and his colleagues would “make our blood cheap for the sake of God, out of love for this homeland and for the sake of freedom and honor of this people ... that Palestine might be liberated.” (70)

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 evade 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-

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8. The addition of the gun-as-theatrical-prop gives the young man a masculine as well as martial demeanor.
performer by the frequency in which these performances include torture and mutilation. The victim is expected to perform agony. As such, the terrorist cherishes and desires the victim as the essential element in an all-too-human sacrifice.

Terrorists’ willingness to sacrifice their own lives often justifies horrible carnage. By incorporating their own deaths (either potentially or actually) into the ritual performance of violence, terrorists become sacrificial victims as well as executioners of justice. Juergensmeyer describes the mentality of the terrorist-as-victim:

Billy Wright, who had been convicted for his role in the terrorist acts conducted by the Protestant Ulster Volunteer Force paramilitary group, said that “there’s no doubt” that within “every terrorist” there is the conviction that “he is the victim.” According to Wright, this allows the terrorist to justify his action “morally within his own mind.” (167)

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 millenialist fervor for end-of-the-world cataclysm in describing the ecstatic experience of destruction. Terrorists live and breathe the violent myths of their respective communities. The story of the hero-victim is no longer a metaphor. 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 passersby. It gives the warrior-martyr immediate access to heroic, cosmic self-identity and group-identity, and allows them to experience their own form of transcendent solidarity.

The role of pleasure is critically important 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, especially when the warrior-martyr is indoctrinated in a clandestine paramilitary training camp with fellow warrior-martyrs. Other sources of pleasure in common with the military would include acting out one’s dominance of one’s foes, the warmth associated with defending the good, and freedom from normal ethical restrictions. It is a sanctified form of team vanity that demands payback in blood for insult. Unlike the military, warrior-martyrs may take pleasure in bonding with their victims as a fellow victim, a claim of innocence when

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9. Carol Burke pointed out to me that not all terrorists go to training camps (personal communication, February 2008). Nevertheless, the pervasive notion that they are soldiers in a war frames their identity within an imagined paramilitary ideal, discipline, and esprit de corps.
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 in which the failure of civil law is aesthetically framed as the dramatic performance of justice.

Dedication to egocentric holy vengeance as a license to perform violence inspires warrior-martyrs to enthusiastically engage in bloodbaths. But it is also eroticized vengeance. Overtly, this violence-fueled eroticism is framed as heterosexual. Speaking of martyrs in the Muslim 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” (198). Folk rituals associated with suicide bombers in Palestine celebrate the deaths of their heroes as wedding parties (Juergensmeyer 166).

The erotic appeal for terrorists may not always be heterosexual, even if it is wrapped up in antihomosexual rhetoric. Juergensmeyer says that for terrorists (which he points out are overwhelmingly male) who bond together in brotherhoods, “such close male bonding could have a homoerotic element” (202). For some terrorists, no doubt it does. Conscious realization of homoerotic feelings for one’s fellow terrorists, however, can cause tremendous cognitive dissonance. Homosexual urges must be sublimated into male bonding, accompanied by strong condemnation of homosexuals, especially by men within the organization who might themselves be troubled by feelings of same-sex desire. Those who feel burdened by homoerotic cravings can resort to martyrdom/infliction of pain as means of private penance and public proof that they are Straight and manly, thus restoring and sanctifying their shattered egos. All the while, they are free to surreptitiously enjoy sublimated homoerotic (and, more than likely, sadomasochistic) pleasure in the punitive performance of violent cosmic retribution alongside other like-minded men. When shameful homoerotic desire is allowed no other outlet, or when it is satisfied in secret desperation, it may covertly fuel acts of violence involving gratuitous bloodshed, mutilation, and same-sex rape in a sacred quest for redemption, self-worth, and a sense of belonging. 10

The higher occurrence of terrorist activities among war-based and virulently homophobic communities 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 United

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10. One could therefore argue that any society that is serious about stopping terrorism should actively promote Gay culture and LGBTQ rights. This would defuse at least some would-be terrorists who seek to purify themselves from unclean homoerotic urges.
Nations) 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 LGBTQ community plans its Pride parade. Anti-Muslim Jewish homophobes and anti-Jewish Muslim homophobes applaud each other’s calls for righteous terrorist violence against Gay people, even as they plot each other’s destruction.

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 LGBTQ 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 joyfully bomb, execute, and torture each other, it is important for Muslim, Christian, and Jewish holy war enthusiasts to “smear the queer.”

Communitas

In order to understand how men bind themselves together into outlaw groups such as terrorists, soldiers, and Circuiteers, it is important to understand how such groups tap into 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 “human-kindness,” Turner describes it as “an essential and generic human bond, without which there could be no society” (97). Communitas is most apparent during ritual moments of “liminality” when people are without status, neither one thing nor another. 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” (138).

Initiations designed to transform a human being into a different person specifically utilize normative communitas, bonding for the purpose of explicit social engineering. 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 with, as Turner puts it, “explicitly formulated views on how men [sic] may best live together in comradely harmony” (134). On the other hand, 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 opens up possibilities. Turner calls it “ecstasy” that is “richly charged with affect, mainly pleasurable ones” (139).

Spontaneous communitas is the inspiration for normative communitas rituals and ideological communitas; normative and ideological communitas are means by which the bonding power of spontaneous communitas can be generated and manipulated. 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 (132). Turner’s definition of communitas is 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 they despise. Ideological communitas saturates the U.S. Declaration of Independence. 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, sane, or good.11

The Military: Designing Acceptable Outlaws

In his biography of Civil War general James S. Wadsworth, Wayne Mahood describes the profound pleasures associated with male bonding in the military:

The creation of a disciplined army, with which the men can identify in both body and spirit, demands a closeness and trust generally unknown—and likely unattainable—at other times. A modern military historian has observed that: “At its height, this sense of comradeship [common in war] is ecstasy.... Men are true comrades only when each is ready to give up his life for the other, without reflection and without thought of personal loss.” (215–16).12

Examination of the pleasures of military camaraderie and the ecstasy of terrorism reveals that normative communitas is at work in

11. In defense of the Declaration of Independence, it should also be noted that, although there were groups of humans left out, it nevertheless held the promise of universal equality, which, over time, is coming to fruition. Today, the ideological communitas implicit in the Declaration and the Constitution are slowly but surely leading the country to full rights for Gay people.
12. The willingness to die in terrorist, military, and religious/patriotic discourse is absent in Circuit discourse, although it can be found somewhat in the Gay male community’s AIDS discourse in which those who seroconvert are portrayed as victim-martyrs.
boot camp and terrorist training camp rituals that bond soldiers and warrior-martyrs together with their respective groups, while ideological communitas can be found in the theories, legends, and cosmologies that justify their existence. In rituals and initiations that foster normative communitas, the magic of humankindness is often tightly bound and restricted to a specific disciplined group. 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 human identity, which is universal in theory but 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. The universal is first encapsulated in reference to the nondenominational “God.” Only then is the focus narrowed to “country,” and further narrowed to “Corps.”

In keeping with that tradition of transformation and indoctrination, I never refer to myself as a Marine in past tense, even though I am no longer active in the service. I suspect that many militant jihadis, Christian crusaders, and communist comrades-in-arms have similar sentiments.

Terrorism follows war with distressing regularity. In civil society, disputes are resolved in the courts precisely so that people who feel 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 civil law. The excessive and transgressive carnage involved in warfare is dressed up as the enforcement of civil law, despite the fact that civil law is the very thing that war negates. Like the human sacrifice of the Meso-Americans, war and the destruction it causes must be justified by fear of greater destruction.

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13. A similar, but nonmilitary (and much less violence-oriented), transformation of self came with my initiation as an ogô in Candomblé when I was bonded with the community and those universal forces personified as the Orixás.

14. Carnage on the battlefield is not the only way that war damages society. As Betty Reardon says categorically in Sexism and the War System, “War is by its very nature wasteful” and is controlled by the male elite, who divert resources to it, but not by the women who are so often its economic victims when budgets for social welfare programs and education are cut (27–28). War proponents, who frame war as necessary for a healthy and productive society, often overlook this point.
if soldiers are not allowed to kill and be killed for the greater good. Framing war as socially and/or divinely sanctified ritual of sacrifice gives it moral justification.

But, like the gladiatorial games, war is not just solemn ritual. It is entertainment and spectacle, a magnificent source of pleasure in which soldiers are an indispensable yet disposable commodity. The frame in which war is set includes the language of theater and sexual performance, thus distanc ing the noncombatant audience from the daily horrors experienced by the troops on the ground. Political hawks and high-ranking officers in command speak of war as high drama akin to team sports and voyeuristic sex; 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. Soldiers are treated like stars if they come back whole and venerated as warrior-martyrs sacrificed on the Altar of Freedom when they come back in body bags. War is sexy; women, it is said, love men in uniform.

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 people on sight, without the threat of punishment if done in the theater of war. Soldiers are undisciplinable by civil law when engaged in battlefield performance and are held accountable to a separate system, the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ), that makes them answerable only to military authorities. In order to prepare soldiers to perform clearly transgressive, excessive, and unethical acts, basic training binds them together with techniques designed to invoke normative communitas within the group, which is then further bound by the appropriately named “chain of command.”

Burke describes the multiple goals of military training for men:

Training not only strives to discipline the body and the mind to automatic response; it also aims to reintegrate the trainee’s personality into a rigid system of superiors and subordinates and, in turn, to win him membership in something larger than himself. (44)

When soldiers win their membership into something larger than themselves, that grand something is supposed to be as big as the United

15. 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.

16. There is a problem, however, when they come back wounded. Although we try to give them respect, they represent the symbolic failure of defeat-as-moral-inferiority that is intrinsically part of war. We find it difficult to romanticize the wounded, sanctify them, or portray them as sexy, so we usually end up at some point simply ignoring them, just as we ignore injured athletes that can no longer play.
States, including civilians. Society sanctifies military personnel as protectors of the nation, extralegal enforcers who are allowed to act outside of the rule of civil law in order to protect society from those who would destroy it. The outlaw status of soldiers is downplayed, even when soldiers sing about it in officially forbidden jody calls. Nevertheless, those trained to kill on a grand scale are potentially dangerous when they come back home. As members of society who value the destructive potential of our military in defending ourselves from our enemies, we pretend for the military’s sake and our own that our veterans are all heroes, not outlaws, and not at all a threat to civil order.  

The training of soldiers invokes normative communitas because each soldier must be disciplined, humbled, and ready to submit to authority without question before each is granted license to destroy. Warriors can be proud of their skills, but they must be kept on a very short leash. The training cannot be superficial; it must run deep and remain 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”) to the point that they no longer privilege their own self-preservation. This conditioning is amazingly effective. To this day, I would willingly give up my life for my beloved Marine Corps if my brothers and sisters were in jeopardy.

Perhaps the strength of this bond (fear of it, actually) motivates societies to oppress those trained in combat. Soldiers are treated much like criminals serving out a sentence for the duration of their time in the military. This oppression is expressed in Marine Corps folk speech by the image of “the big green weenie (penis) up your asshole” representing the Corps as an uncaring, mindless bureaucracy-schlong that sodomizes helpless Marines and can, absurdly, “take a dump (defecate) on you.” Soldiers’ civil rights are seriously curtailed, as are their movements, their clothing options, and their voices. Enlisted personnel make up an incarcerated yet mobile lower-class workforce, and officers are their semi-incarcerated upper-class wardens who are forbidden by law to interact too closely with them. The means for conditioning soldiers to accept the institutional oppression forced upon them in

17. For the most part, the pretense works. Most veterans never seriously consider applying their military skills against their own people.
18. It is common to say that one serves time in the military, just as one serves time in jail.
19. Green is often used to represent Marines as a siblinghood that transcends race. There are no Blacks or Whites in the Corps, only dark green and light green.
20. When a man is made an officer, he becomes “an officer and a gentleman” (a woman becomes “an officer and a gentlewoman”) marking officers as elite and the enlisted ranks as common, neither gentlemen nor gentlewomen.
military life is to invoke a form of heroic punitive solidarity with strong secular-spiritual and often thinly-veiled religious overtones.

Rituals for normative communitas are intrinsically punitive. Initiators crush initiates into a state of status-less degradation by forcing them to endure shared suffering. The permanent transformation that normative communitas is supposed to imprint upon the initiate has an explicit ideological purpose that can readily be exploited in terms of an “Us Against Them” protective-punitive ideology. In the best of soldiers, however, their outlaw status is tempered by universal humanitarian ethics that theoretically supersede the thirst for vendetta fostered by the battlefield experience. Officially, the military expects soldiers to disobey unethical orders from superiors. In practice, however, those ethics are often superseded by submission to authority and loyalty to the pack at all costs to insure survival of the group. It is in the wide and murky gap between official humanitarian ethics, troop survival (the strong moral imperative to give up everything, including one’s life, for one’s fellow soldiers), and prior conditioning to obey orders without question that soldiers find themselves tempted to behave like terrorists.

The Spiritual Ecstasy of the Circuit

In contrast to terrorists and soldiers (but not necessarily in opposition to them21), we have Circuiteers.

Like terrorists and soldiers, Circuit participants are outlaws who transgress the normal bounds of propriety of their larger community. But the Circuit uses a ritual frame in which all of the participants join together into one multifaceted 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 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.22 In a time out of

21. It is impossible for me to completely separate terrorism from more ethical forms of sadomasochism practiced in the Gay male community. Since the Circuit includes Leather events and tolerates S&M practices that are an important part of Leather culture, I will not portray the terrorist and the Circuiteer as polar opposites.

22. In an interview with DJ Barry Harris, he stated that the Circuit was not spiritual. 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 was, for that moment, telepathically linked to the crowd. When I asked him if he would consider that experience
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 spontaneous communitas of the Circuit elevates participants into a state of status-free grandeur through shared joy. The biggest difference is the role of coercion. Normative communitas is goal-oriented and marked by the regulation of routine by authority figures

spiritual, he agreed (interview, September 2000). Most DJs I have interviewed have had similar experiences.
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 thus determined, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, by the very people who are undergoing the transformative process they themselves have set in motion: “It is the people as a whole, but organized in their own way” (255).

Differences are also physically visible in the individual and communal body-minds of soldiers and Circuiteers. A soldier in a platoon wears an identical uniform that is differentiated by subtle and not-so-subtle signs of merit and rank; individual status is inscribed on one’s body through one’s clothes, with clear markers that limit and regulate interaction within a rigid top-down command structure. The body of a Circuiteer, however, is pretty much naked from waist up with no insignias of rank or honor; potential for interaction is fluid, regulated somewhat by one’s physical desirability and one’s object(s) of desire. The fluidity of the collective body-mind in the Circuit likewise contrasts with the rigidity found in the military corps. When spectators look down at troops marching in formation, they see precise lines, exact movements, and universally stiff postures (especially when standing at attention) in a performance that submerges individual soldiers into the group. Soldiers become one highly disciplined body and one strictly regimented mind, a powerful and polished human weapon in all of its hardened finery. Not so the Circuit crowd; observers looking down at the sea of men will see bottom-up communal consensus-in-motion that is constantly reinforced, undermined, and re-negotiated by individuals physically merging with and smoothly disengaging from the collective flow.23

Social fluidity promotes the generation of a communal self that arises by its own power and makes its own rules. Spontaneous communitas in the Circuit must be, using Turner’s word, “invoked,” not forced (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 tends to display various degrees of body fascism as people critically check out whoever

23. I wish I could say that I came up with the observations expressed in this paragraph on my own. They originate from a conversation with Carol Burke on a rough draft of this chapter that I showed her in early 2008.
approaches them. 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, groom their hair a short time before the event, and wear just the right outfits for peacock-esque display on the dance floor. Egocentric display is likewise vitally important in a soldier’s presentation of self (such as a uniform that is flawlessly perfect, what Marines call “locked and cocked”). If videos of carefully staged speeches given by warrior-martyrs before they die and those of meticulously-groomed Osama bin Laden (produced with appropriate props and costumes) are any indication, the same concern for image is true for terrorists as well.

A big difference between the Circuiteer and the soldier/terrorist is the source of authority. Demand for personal excellence in the Circuit means participants are free to elevate or degrade each other at will. No top-down command structure is there to regulate behavior. We can assume, however, that most everyone at a Circuit party 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 between the ego of a soldier/terrorist and a Circuiteer is that performed identity in the Circuit is much more frivolous; it is tied to physical appearances (and, to a less immediate degree, witty repartee) rather than defense of the nation and/or cosmic war. All of that masculine vanity that tempts beautiful Circuit men to act with insufferable arrogance is trivial when compared to the grand egocentrism attached to religious fundamentalism, secular ideological purity, and the soldier-as-hero. In the case of religious fundamentalism, holy vanity all too often allows one to damn perceived enemies to eternal hell. Eternally damning others is only a short cognitive distance from license to kill and maim them. The performance of icy disdain by the Gay male body fascist is every bit as obnoxiously vain as the worst fanatic 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 destructive power of the gun, the bomb, and the helpless victim at one’s feet in military extralegal and terrorist illegal 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. The root cause of body fascism and drug use is fear of rejection. Fondness for intoxicants and preoccupation with one’s physical fitness are means by which participants attempt to fit themselves into the performance frame of the Circuit.

Obsession 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 basically 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 reflections 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 one accessory among several for attraction. In turn, a Circuiteer uses intoxicants 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.

A high level of performance anxiety is necessary for the production of fierce solidarity. Performance anxiety is the common predicament faced by the vast majority of Circuit 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, shares this anxiety. In the vulnerability 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, ego-crushing performance anxiety is also different from the suffering of initiates in normative communitas who have no other option but to suffer. At any point, Circuiteers may step away from the party. It is their threefold desire to share, judge, and be admired that keeps them there.

As mentioned earlier, positive attention is the coin of the realm. When 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, in others and in themselves. 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.
Muscle Camp, Boot Camp, and Real Men

Humor is a vital performance genre intrinsic to both the military and the Circuit communities’ internal regulatory mechanisms and production of solidarity. In the military, humor allows soldiers to cope with their shared institutional oppression. In the Circuit, however, humor prevents restrictive codification of the ritual performance and is thus anti-institutional.

As mentioned earlier, muscle camp is a performance genre of Circuit humor in which well-built men adopt exaggerated effeminate behavior. It subverts the pervasive notion in violence-oriented masculinities that the masculine is in opposition to, or even in combat with, the feminine. Muscle camp, the performance of muscular nelliness, is related to the hardened femininity of the shaved headed semi-drag performance artists. But muscle camp is meant to be hilarious while the fierce androgyny of the performance artist is not.24

Humor in boot camp can likewise be anti-institutional, but only to a point. The sexualized humor of jody calls sung by drill instructors who transformed me into a “lean, mean fighting machine” Marine affirmed their masculine status as outlaws who did not kowtow to every whim of their commanding officers. It was a form of intimate sharing between the drill instructors and the recruits that softened the drill instructors’ reputations as hard-hearted representatives of an unmerciful institution. Humor defused the underlying potential for homoeroticism and homophobia by confronting that potential through verbal expression within a comic frame. It also allowed our drill instructors to occasionally perform as entertainers rather than oppressors, thus winning our admiration as well as our fear. Nevertheless, such humor was rarely reciprocal. It was top-down and put us in our place because it was done to us as the targets of the humor but never to other drill instructors, officers (to their faces), or any other fully-initiated Marine.

In terms of effeminate behavior, the performance of masculinity in the military is not devoid of androgyny. In Crossing the Line, Simon Bronner describes cross-dressing as an important aspect of naval equator traditions. Its importance is similar to that of sexualized humor in boot camp in defusing homoeroticism and homophobia; the feminine is performed in order to exorcize it:

To effect manliness at sea, especially given the view that maternally dominated, landed civilization is feminized and soft, and the military insecurity about homosexuality in an all-male environment, female

24. The goal of most performance artists is glamor, not humor. This also includes the performance of “tranny fierceness” by transwomen in the Circuit.
figures or men in feminized positions, are sexually dominated and ridiculed ... characters are externalized, ejected from the self; they are performed in Wog Queen contests, dog auctions, and homosexual enactments as ridiculous, passive, weak, and scared. (46)

Muscle camp, on the other hand, exorcizes the violent masculine identity that frames Straight men’s relationships with other men in terms of fear and dominance. This is also the purpose of girl names and the tendency for Gay men to call each other “girl,” “girlfriend,” “darling,” “hon,” “fag,” and “bitch” by invoking common membership in Gay male sisterhood. The performance of nelliness is not meant to exorcize the feminine but to highlight it in ways that simultaneously debase those macho men who think of the feminine as inferior and elevate effeminate men as possessors of a performance genre that gains them favorable attention. It distinguishes Gay men from their Straight brothers, not by framing Gay men as effeminate, but as real men who are not afraid of the feminine.

Just as the barriers separating masculinity and femininity are undermined in the Circuit, so are attempts to regulate and codify its spirituality. Anyone who solemnizes Circuit ecstatic dance risks being ridiculed. There have been normative movements, such as Soul Dance, to channel Circuit spirituality as a means for communal 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, 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. The only institution that counts is the one spontaneously created, enacted, and enforced by the collective Circuit body-mind.

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.

25. Unlike Straight male discourse in which the feminizing of another man implies sexual as well as physical dominance of him, Gay male feminizing desexualizes other Gay men. When Circuiteers refer to each other as sisters, it means that they are equals who are not sexually attracted to each other.
It is during such moments that Gay men can forget that they are Gay and enjoy being men.

Tribe

A by-product of fierce solidarity in the Circuit is the peaceful regulation of the community by the community, significantly diminishing the need for brute force.

In popular imagination, a tribe is imagined as 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, biting humor or well-placed candor can quickly deflate an overinflated 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, where positive attention is the coin of the realm, 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 “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 or camouflage pants, all wearing boots (one had a chain attached to his wallet)—all of them living proof that, as Georg Simmel tells us, vanity is the need for others in order to despise them
(209). 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 and violence. 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 Fahrenheit 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.
At the U.S. Air Force Academy, I was subjected to four years of incessant personal inspection of my dormitory, uniform, and grooming. As a group, we were inspected on our marching/parading and scored against competing squadrons. That scoring was an explicit motivation as privileges were granted to high-scoring units in addition to the personal satisfaction or sharing in the group’s pride.

There was no doubt this training was normative in intent. Once we progressed beyond basic training, we grew increasingly aware of the absurdity of our system. Nonetheless, the motivations for team success and achievement forced us to continue playing the game.

Most days, hundreds of visiting tourists perched atop our marching area would look down at 4,000 cadets marching to lunch each day. We often referred to the whole scenario and the academy experience as “the zoo.” I can remember feeling alternatively proud and disgusted/humiliated by the spectacle on any given day over those four years.

Although I personally didn’t fully recognize my orientation while a cadet, I clearly remember the palpable sexual undertones of the humor and innuendo. With thousands of seventeen-to-twenty-two-year-old-young men, the sexual tensions were indeed thick. In fact, controlling and releasing that tension through the methods the author speaks about are important avenues to maintaining good order.

I was indeed attracted to the Circuit: judge, be judged, and share—with a clear desire to “knock out” as much sex as I could. I’d often go alone or with friends that at first I barely knew. I was desperate to find guys like me and to share experiences and ground myself in some shared “normalcy” via such acceptance. Although I didn’t use drugs, I consumed alcohol to aid the “be judged” part as I pursued the almighty A-listers. My peers suggested that without harder drugs, my experience wouldn’t be as strong. Perhaps not, but I did certainly experience several ecstatic moments on the dance floor shared by new friends and old. At moments like that, I soon contemplated why this could be so wrong and laughed while considering what my military buddies would think if they saw me in that environment.

I would acknowledge much of the author’s eroticism and homoeroticism in my military experience, albeit usually manifested differently than his Parris Island stories. That tension dissipated as I began my active duty career, lived off base, and began juggling professional and
personal life under don’t ask, don’t tell. But the culture that developed during my early years of training persisted, especially when some assumed that political correctness wasn’t required when females were absent.

I find comparisons of military soldiers to terrorists compelling, fascinating, and thought-provoking in many respects. However, it’d be irresponsible for me if I didn’t make clear that there are very key differences between these groups. I spent countless hours in the classroom and in “real” situations learning the ethics of military conflict and the often-nuanced classification of combatant versus non-combatant, lawful target versus unlawful target, and the Geneva Conventions. Yes, I was trained to kill and to kill well (as well as rescue fallen soldiers and provide care/first aid for them), but painstaking effort was given to temper that ability with the knowledge and wisdom to discern right from wrong. Life-and-death situations on the battlefield are never black and white, and the humanitarian or combative choices our young soldiers make are extremely difficult. To the extent they make poor choices (in hindsight), it is a failure of our training—not our policy—which is to make correct and ethical choices with respect to the use of lethal force.

The expression “one man’s freedom fighter is another man’s terrorist” is useful mostly to remind us that we ought to consider the political, social, and economic causes for which our enemies fight and that we may share more interests than we care to remember. In fact, we can all hope that political, social, and economic choices will be afforded to those for whom self-sacrifice appears their only option. As such, terrorists’ intent to kill indiscriminately is what distinguishes them, and such moral emptiness (however distorted by religion) will be their undoing in the long-term.