

**PARTY BOYS:  
IDENTITY, COMMUNITY, AND THE CIRCUIT**

by

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## *Abstract*

This dissertation explores how gender, desire, and the body are understood and practiced by gay men as they construct a sense of self and community in the context of “circuit parties”—very large gay men’s dance parties held annually across North America. Analytically, “the circuit” can be understood as an economy of pleasure in which normative notions of masculinity, drug use, the pursuit of sexual encounters, and concerns about community are at the centre of its exchanges. The work of Judith Butler, Pierre Bourdieu, and Axel Honneth form the theoretical backdrop of this project while ethnographic observations of the circuit experience and in-depth interviews with circuit attendees were conducted to solicit subjects’ thoughts about the circuit

In addition to offering a critical response to question of how the circuit experience informs identification and practices, this project also offers a critique and re-evaluation of some of the ways the relationship between identification, practice, agency, and social structure is conceptualized. In much of the social sciences, practice and identification are understood in terms of the interplay between social structure and individual agency. I draw on Judith Butler and Pierre Bourdieu because both challenge and complicate this conceptualization of practice and identification by bringing the body and embodiment into the agency-structure-practice debate.

The circuit experience represents an excellent crucible through which to think about the body’s relationship to practice and identification insofar as the circuit is

primarily experienced through bodily terms rather than cognitive or intellectual terms. Prolonged dancing, the use of recreational drugs, the pursuit of sexual encounters, and the pleasures associated with sociality create a context where visceral bodily pleasures are foregrounded over other modes of experience. I use this aspect of the circuit experience to raise questions about the way Butler and Bourdieu use the body in their analysis and interrogation of conventional conceptualizations of practice. I close by turning to the work of Honneth to bring bodily experience into the agency/structure debate, arguing identification and practice might be more productively understood as a struggle for social recognition played across and mediated through the body and bodily pleasure.

# *Dedication*

For Sean—who was there at the beginning.

For Joe—who was there at the end.

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# *Table of Contents*

<b>Approval.....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>Abstract .....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Dedication.....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>Table of Contents.....</b>	<b>viii</b>
<b>Prelude</b>	
<b>When the Circuit Comes to Town.....</b>	<b>1</b>
Circuit as Fieldsite.....	4
The Circuit and Social Science .....	7
The Body, Idioms of Pleasure, Practice, and Identification.....	10
On Being an Insider and Method .....	12
On the Implications of an Uneasy Identification.....	17
(Re)Conceptualising the Circuit Experience.....	18
A Look Ahead: Chapter Overview.....	21
<b>Chapter 1</b>	
<b>“Honey that’s why you do this with friends.”.....</b>	<b>33</b>
New Year’s Eve, 1997 (I).....	34
Writing into Community .....	37
New Year’s Eve, 1997 (II) .....	38
Writing the Body .....	42
Taking Embodiment Seriously .....	45
Conclusion.....	53

<b>Theoretical Interlude 1</b>	
<b>The Performative Thesis, Practice, and Identification .....</b>	<b>58</b>
Introduction .....	58
The Trouble with Gender Trouble.....	61
Social Structure .....	62
On the Question of Change, Practice, and Resignification .....	64
Bodies in the Underbrush of Discourse.....	71
Bugs and the Circuit.....	73
 <b>Chapter 2</b>	
<b>10,000 People, Fireworks, Drag Shows, Big DJs, and Beautiful People.....</b>	<b>79</b>
The Circuit Party Proper.....	80
I'm There for the Music (and Dancing) .....	86
The Sex (and The Look).....	90
Territorialization.....	93
Territorialization and Touch.....	96
The Drugs .....	99
Meeting People, Being in a Gay Space .....	103
Being Uninhibited for a Night and Forgetting the Real World.....	109
Conclusion.....	114
A Look Forward .....	116
 <b>Chapter 3</b>	
<b>Alternatives and a Life Outside .....</b>	<b>121</b>
On the Outside: Alternative Views .....	123
Responses and Reactions.....	126
Schematizing Interpretations .....	137
Gyms, Baths, and Bars .....	141
Conclusion.....	155
 <b>Chapter 4</b>	
<b>“Flaunting the Body” .....</b>	<b>158</b>
Introduction .....	158
Breaking with the Preconstructed Object.....	161
“... The Emergence of these Problems...” .....	164
Pleasure and the Subject.....	166
“The best I could say was that it was like bliss” .....	172
First Hand Knowledge and Naïve Questions .....	176
Conclusion: Analytical Implications .....	192
 <b>Theoretical Interlude 2</b>	
<b>Reconceptualizing the Circuit .....</b>	<b>199</b>
Introduction .....	199
Outline .....	203
Bourdieu’s Sociology of Interest.....	203
Time and Uncertainty.....	211
Field Analysis.....	212
The Structural Properties of Fields.....	214

<b>Chapter 5</b>	
<b>Interpreting the Circuit .....</b>	<b>218</b>
Circuit as a Field of Struggle.....	219
Critics, Proponents, and the Meaning of the Circuit .....	222
Attendees and The Look.....	236
The Look as Capital .....	241
Minimizing the Look and the Logic of the Circuit .....	248
Conclusion.....	256
<b>Chapter 6</b>	
<b>The Circuit and the Field of Power: Neanderthals and the Micro-phallus .....</b>	<b>261</b>
Overview .....	268
“...in a Neanderthal-like way...” .....	268
Judith Butler and the Heterosexual Economy of Desire .....	278
“I think I had like micro-phallus” .....	281
Women and the “Feminine Element” .....	284
Conclusion.....	289
<b>Theoretical Interlude 3</b>	
<b>Thinking Theory Through the Circuit .....</b>	<b>295</b>
Butler on Bourdieu .....	298
Bourdieu on Butler .....	301
Body as Gap, Bridge, and Blind Spot .....	313
“No, it was more of a click” .....	316
Identification, Practice, and the Desire for Recognition .....	321
Conclusion: The Desire for Recognition and the Body .....	323
<b>References .....</b>	<b>328</b>
<b>Appendix A</b>	
<b>Ethics Approval .....</b>	<b>336</b>
<b>Appendix B</b>	
<b>Subject’s Informed Consent Forms.....</b>	<b>337</b>
<b>Appendix C</b>	
<b>Interview Schedule .....</b>	<b>346</b>

# *Prelude*

## *When the Circuit Comes to Town*

In this dissertation I consider how gender, desire, and the body are understood and practised by gay men as they construct a sense of self and community. I particularise this consideration in the context of “circuit parties”—very large dance parties organised for and around gay men and held on an annual basis across North America. *Circuit Noize*—both a magazine and a web-site devoted to circuit party aficionados describes “The Circuit” as:

a series of gay dance parties that are held in North America. A circuit party gives us the chance to escape the pressures of our day-to-day existence and to enter an altered world where friendship, dancing, love, spirituality and self-expression are celebrated. When the Circuit comes to town, that town becomes an instant gay ghetto full of men. Groups travelling from all across the country enjoy the festivities, sightsee and engage in different events from skiing to river-rafting, all scheduled around large dance events. This is a big part of the attraction of a circuit party—it gives us the opportunity to take over entire sections of a city, making the restaurants, hotels, and streets into queer spaces. Many cities are developing parties which emphasize the assets of their local community, from gay ski weekends to an escape to South Beach in the middle of the winter. From a party at the Olympic Stadium in Montreal to

a spring celebration in the middle of the desert. This trend is now expanding to international destinations as well.<sup>1</sup>

Organisationally, circuit parties typically take place annually on the same weekend in the same location. Circuit weekends centre on one or more large-scale dance parties which are often loosely based on a theme. Music and dancing are the central components of the circuit experience, along with performances by singers, dancers, and light shows. These dance events run between 6 and upwards of 12 hours, and are understood as gay celebrations among friends or soon to be friends, and invariably contain homoerotic elements. Drug use and sexual activities are commonly understood as a constituent component of the experience. Related events also include welcome receptions, opening parties, after-hours events, and afternoon tea-dances. Depending on the locale, other activities also take place (river rafting, ski events, pool parties). Typically, circuit parties are hosted in resort locations in North America and attract hundreds and usually thousands of gay men each year. Montreal's Black and Blue Ball held in October regularly attracts over 15,000 attendees. Party events are organised by both for-profit production companies and non-profit agencies that use raised revenue for funding purposes. Circuit parties organised by non-profit organisations generally direct funds toward the gay community and HIV related issues. Entrance requires a ticket purchase, with individual tickets ranging from \$20 to over \$100.

Through "the circuit", I ask two related research questions. First, I ask: What is the nature of circuit and circuit-like events? Two key aspects of the circuit's organization and meaning should be introduced here. On the one hand, the circuit is experienced primarily in bodily and affective terms rather than in cognitive or intellectual terms. Due to the nature of circuit parties, language and verbal communication at the events are attenuated or restricted. High end synchronised sound and light shows, the rhythmic movement of prolonged dancing, continuous and very loud music, the use of mood enhancing drugs, considerable aerobic exertion, performances by singers, large numbers of attendees, norms which encourage a great deal of physical/sexual contact among dancers, and very loud music result in an event that foregrounds a non-verbal experience at the best of times. On the other hand, the circuit is clearly a gendered and sexualised

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<sup>1</sup> [www.circuitnoise.com](http://www.circuitnoise.com), July 21, 1999

space—it is understood to be for *gay* men and about being a *gay man*. These two aspects—the bodily and gendered nature of the circuit—form central points in this analysis. The second research question I ask is: What is the relationship between the nature of circuit and circuit-like events, identification, and community?

Methodologically, I ask and answer these two questions through the practice of ethnography, basing my observations on my attendance at—and participation in—a number of circuit and circuit-like events. This ethnographic engagement has involved attending circuit parties, volunteering in their organisation, working in the offices of a production company that promotes and produces circuit events, listening to and reflecting on informal conversations with those who make—in lesser and greater degrees—the circuit part of their life, interviewing men who attend circuit parties, and occasionally following various newsgroups and listserves devoted to circuit parties. Theoretically, I explore the relationship between the circuit, identification, and community through the work of Judith Butler, Pierre Bourdieu, and Axel Honneth.

Two implications emerge from asking and answering these research questions in relation to ethnographic practice and the conceptual tools developed in the writing of Butler, Bourdieu, and Honneth. First, the circuit—with its peculiarly bodily emphasis—represents an excellent crucible for raising and thinking about the role the body and bodily experience play in how we, on the one hand, currently theorise the relationship between practice, agency, and social structure and how, on the other hand, we think about ethnographic representation. Second, asking and answering these research questions through this particular theoretical and methodological intersection brings with it the opportunity to generate a *novel* or *critical* substantive understanding of the circuit experience, touching on what the circuit is “about” and how it is lived by those who make it—in lesser or greater degrees—part of their lives. Current conceptualizations of the circuit—by both those who attend circuit parties and those who, increasingly, see the circuit as an object worthy of study—are relatively constrained. There is a strong tendency to frame the circuit in terms of a relatively crude duality, with those who regard the circuit as a benefit to gay men’s communities and gay men’s identities at one end and those who see the circuit as a dangerous, drug-fuelled and sex-crazed exercise in body fascism at the other. Neither of these positions—nor some middle ground combination of

the two—is productive if the goal is to assist gay men who attend the circuit—and gay men in general—in making healthy and productive choices about how they choose to live their lives. What I have seen and experienced at both circuit and circuit-like parties suggests that these events are spaces and social relations through which attendees realise—in the double sense of “understand” and “make real”—themselves as gendered and desiring subjects in relation to relatively normative notions of what it means to be a gay men. Bringing this aspect of the circuit to the foreground represents a means of contributing to a critical and novel interpretation of what the circuit is “about”.

Thus, as much as the theoretical concepts associated with Butler, Bourdieu and the methodological principles of ethnographic practice represent tools to unpack the meaning of the circuit experience and its connections to practices of identity and community, I also regard the circuit experience as a means of speaking to, unpacking, and rearranging the theory and method from which I draw. In what follows, I begin by offering some considerations of the circuit as a site for research. I follow this with some thoughts on conceptualizing the circuit, highlighting the centrality of bodily experiences that characterises it. Following this, I outline how a study of the circuit experience can help query some of the current debates in poststructural thinking about practice and identity as well as assist in contributing to debates about ethnographic practice and representation. I then discuss how my status as an insider represents a particularly productive point from which to develop and proffer a novel interpretation of the circuit. I close this introduction with chapter-by-chapter overview of the remaining project.

### **Circuit as Fieldsite**

I conceptualise my field of inquiry as less field-as-place and more field-as-social relations or field-as-social location (Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Marcus 1986). Portions of what goes on in my everyday—over dinner, at coffee bars, discussion with friends—is about the circuit or circuit-like events. “Are you going to the White Party? How was Montreal? Who was spinning? Do you know if tickets are on sale? Have you bought tickets? Who are you going with?” Those of us who do circuit parties do not attend them constantly—in fact, we attend them only a few times a year. And yet, the idea of the circuit pervades the lives of those who I associate with in varying degrees of intensity and to select one point or location as a field “site” would be imprudent at best. The ideas

and practices associated with the circuit experience exist within and through many overlapping and interlocking social relations—it is not a place or thing. It is about meaning and interaction. Thus, to delineate a field site would represent an arbitrary and brutal analytical decision that in the face of this simultaneity would hide more than it might illuminate. This is, of course, an enormously complex and abstract way of conceptualizing an object of study—and despite this complexity, any analysis of this object requires a means of operationalizing these relations. Following Marcus' (1986) suggestions, I think of the circuit experience in terms of multiple locales. Marcus (1986) suggests that an ethnographic consideration of “the ways in which closely observed cultural worlds are embedded in larger, more impersonal systems is possible through projects that are both multi-locale and strategically situated” (p. 166). In multi-locale explorations, the ethnographer might try:

in a single text to represent multiple, blindly interdependent locales, each explored ethnographically and mutually linked by the intended and unintended consequences of activities within them...[T]he point of this kind of project would be to start with some prior view of a system and to provide an ethnographic account of it, by showing the forms of local life that the system encompasses, and then leading to novel or revised views of the nature of the system itself. (Marcus 1986: 171)

The strategically situated ethnographer “constructs the text around a strategically selected locale, treating the system as background, albeit without losing sight of the fact that it is integrally constitutive of cultural life within the bounded subject matter” (Marcus 1986: 172). In relation to this project, there are at least three locales through which I think about the circuit and the circuit experience. I understand all of these locales as situated within or in relation to a larger heteronormative order and chose them as a means of providing an ethnographic account of that system.

The first locale I attend to is that of the circuit event itself. A conventional caveat needs to be made: any analysis is based on distinctions that are, for the most part, analytical. What constitutes a circuit party shifts with who asks and answers the question. There are large scale dance events that are clearly understood, advertised and discussed as “circuit parties”: Montreal's Military Party, Leather Ball, and Black and Blue Ball, the White Parties in Palm Springs and Miami, The Morning Party on Fire Island, Snow Ball in Whistler, The Black Party in New York, Hotlanta in Atlanta, Gay Day's at Disney in



Orlando. Associated with these events are a core set of DJs, singers, performers, go-go dancers, set locales, and identifiable aesthetics. More difficult to construe as circuit parties are parties put on during Gay Pride in Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver, or San Francisco, or events put on by promoters on long weekends or New Year's that begin to develop a history. While not always understood as "circuit parties", the meanings and relations that allow individuals to circulate—the behaviours, attitudes, music, and aesthetics—are similar, if not identical, to "true" circuit parties. Core DJs make frequent appearances, performers are common, and go-go gods do their stuff, but the scale and density of these events do not measure up to what is generally understood as a circuit party. Smaller in size and density, but no less organized by the aesthetic and social relations of the circuit experience are dance events in nightclubs and after-hours clubs. And while on the surface these events appear similar to raves, there is an easily identifiable set of distinctions that anyone who engages with the circuit can point to—age of the crowd, sexual orientation, gender, aesthetic, music. All of these events have been and are sites for my research.

A second locale is the practices and ideas existing within the informal friendship networks of those invested in the circuit. In light of the fact that I live and exist within, in lesser and greater degrees, a "circuit community", I am continually exposed to a variety of informal social engagements with friends and acquaintances where the circuit as a topic of conversations comes up. In these cases, I do what I imagine any ethnographer does—prick up my ears and listen. At times I ask questions or make comments with the hope of creating some dialogue around a particular issue, relationship, or understanding that has come up. At other times I participate in the discussion with no active research intent. I try to remain conscious of my own interests and desires through the economy of pleasure—academic interests as well as the everyday desires. Here, I am critically aware that my ethnographic practice is no longer about a particular field, where the field can be understood as a place. It is about understanding how social relations constitute not only an experience, but also selves and relationships (see Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Related to the informal conversations is the huge quantity of information found in circuit ephemera (brochures, postcards, newsletters, posters, promotional material, etc.). In the course of my attendance at circuit events, I have collected documents and printed matter

that serves to illustrate the themes of the circuit. There are also a variety of websites devoted to circuit parties as well as various newsgroups. Part and parcel of these conversations is an increasing body of research and analysis conducted on the circuit by journalists and writers, as well as academic researchers. I consider all these aspects of the circuit as data.

A third location centres on the opportunities I have had to be involved with the production of circuit and circuit-like events. I have worked within a production company that organises several events that are easily understood as circuit parties. I have also had the opportunity to volunteer at smaller, local, circuit-like events. The observations and recordings made in these contexts afford a unique perspective on the intentions, desires, and constraints faced by producers and promoters as they construct and execute dance events. Finally, I have complimented and contradicted my own interpretation of the circuit experience and these informal conversations with the aid of in-depth interviews. Interviews have been conducted with both individuals and couples. In all cases, I chose interview subjects because I had reason to believe they had something unique to say about the circuit or because they were representative of several themes associated with the circuit. In most cases, those interviewed managed to do both. In short, I chose to sample subjects based on both relevance and curiosity. A rough interview schedule is included as an appendix.

## **The Circuit and Social Science**

Any scholarly discussion of the circuit experience begs a consideration of the body and the body's role in how we think and live our lives. While earlier discussions of the body in social theory could lament the body's absence as a point of inquiry, current commentary must contend with the proliferation of body talk (Csordas 1994, 1999; Featherstone and Turner 1995; Grosz 1994; Lock 1993; Scheper-Hues and Lock 1987; Shilling 1991, 1993, 1997a, 1997b; Turner 1984; Turner 1994; Turner 2000; Williams and Bendelow 1998). For Csordas (1994, 1999) one of the most significant effects to come out of this proliferation is an understanding of the body not as an unchanging substrate to culture, but rather as the indeterminate, contingent, and flexible ground of culture. This understanding represents an opportunity to shed new light onto old questions, offering "a critical methodological opportunity to reformulate theories of

culture, self, and experience with the body at the centre of analysis” (Csordas 1994: 4). I see this research project as one of these methodological opportunities.

One of the most entrenched components of the way current scholarship approaches our understandings of the self and practice—academically or otherwise—is through a dualistic or binary logic. Within sociology, this binary logic informs one of the discipline’s key debates: the relationship between practice, agency, and structure. How do we theorise a subject who is able to exercise change in light of constraining social structures while at the same time also being permeable enough to be affected by those same social structures? Critiques and reformulations of dualism can be found throughout the social sciences and humanities and the “linguistic turn” is just such one attempt. Girding the linguistic turn is the assumption that since language or discourse mediates lived experience, the object of inquiry necessarily must be language or discourse insofar as it is all we have access to. Much poststructural analysis, as a moment in this linguistic turn, attempts to render practice and identification *in terms of* linguistic structures—as an effect and possibility of discourse or discursively maintained power. Within ethnographic literature, the linguistic turn manifests itself in questions about ethnographic representation, focusing on the political dimensions of how and to what effect social scientists do their representing. “The substantive issues in this [ethnographic] critique are political and ideological: by what right do we represent the ethnographic other, what are the consequences of doing so, what are the best alternative modes of representation?” (Csordas 1994: 10).

In one major respect, this linguistic turn is problematic: in its claim to resist or subvert binary distinctions it establishes an overdetermined view of discourse, text, or textual practices at the expense of the lived body. In rethinking agency in terms of discursive structures poststructural writing transforms material activity into a discursive phenomenon, abstracting it from lived experience (Csordas 1999, 1994, Turner 1994). In the context of ethnography, a distinction is made between the mind as a mode of representation and the body as a lived experience to be represented. Analytic primacy is given to the politics and poetics of representing lived experience, with only minor reference to the way lived bodily experiences might inform how and what we represent. “It has come to the point where the text metaphor has virtually (indeed, in the sense of

virtual reality) gobbled up the body itself, as evidenced in phrases like ‘the body as text’, ‘the inscription of culture on the body’, or ‘reading the body’” (Csordas 1999: 182).

Behind—or perhaps more metaphorically, “buried beneath”—this overdetermined view of discourse is a weakly conceptualised notion of the body and the role it plays in who we are, how we act, and how we know. Poststructural theory, with its articulation of the body as a text upon which discourse is inscribed, assumes but paradoxically neglects the body as a lived experience in its account of the subject’s production and capacity to engage with and change the social world. The critique of ethnographic representation relies on the notion of bodily experience, but seldom articulates the nature or effect of this bodily experience on ethnographic practice (except see Jackson 1989 and Stoller 1989, 1997). Both poststructuralism and ethnographic critique assume the idea of a body or bodily experience, but neither seems to offer an adequate account for the body’s role in lived experience or how we might know this lived experience. In effect, the body’s presence remains assumed and unaccounted for.

The circuit, however, is a profoundly bodily experience, whose dimensions are most easily charted out through the idiom of pleasure:

To me it pushes a lot of pleasure buttons at the same time: listening to good music, having music course through my body. If it’s, you know, a terrible sound system or something like that, it’ll make a big difference. But primarily it’s extra-sensory feelings you get from the drugs, but the music as well. There’s a certain amount of, like looking forward to spending an evening having pleasant thoughts, and emotions. And the physical element of it too. Pushes a lot of pleasure buttons at the same time. (Frank)

It’s the whole pleasure thing that goes with the whole event. From you know talking to people, meeting new people, dancing with them, playing with them, listening to music. The whole thing is an event. You always see something new, there’s always something different that catches your eyes in an event. Sometimes it’s a performance or the visuals you see. I always get some sort of satisfaction in something I wouldn’t normally see. It could be just people, it could be something in the room, it could be a decoration, it could be a very little thing that would, you know, please me. (Bill)

Both Frank and Bill comment on the complex of pleasures associated with the circuit experience—touching on both its distinctly physical components as well as pleasures associated with sociality. In light of the centrality of pleasure I believe the circuit

represents a site in which the body buried in the underbrush of poststructural discourse and ethnographic “being there” might be unearthed and examined.

The circuit— where bodily pleasures are so manifestly present as both object and experience—is an interesting and productive space to begin thinking about what the body might do for social research methodology and social theory. More particularly, a careful consideration of the circuit’s somatic, pleasurable dimensions creates two potentials that, if capitalised on, can deepen current scholarship’s engagement with the devil of dualism. On the one hand, at a theoretical level, attending to a set of intense bodily experiences through the lens of poststructuralism carries with it a potential to rethink practice and identification in ways that move through or around the dualism associated with poststructuralism. On the other hand, attending carefully to the bodily dimension of the circuit experience has the potential to contribute to a growing shift in the way we conceive the relationship between the body and ethnographic representation. In the context of this project, this methodological potential emerges most clearly when the implications of my status as an “insider” doing “insider research” are explored. As an insider, I occupy a privileged, but by no means coherent, position that enables me to begin understanding the circuit experience with the body, highlighting the relationship between bodily experience and knowing.

Thus this project’s goal extends beyond simply filling in a substantive research gap. Its goal is also to use the bodily experiences of the circuit to think about the limits and potentials of poststructuralism and ethnographic practice. By attending to the pleasures of the circuit, this ethnographic project aims to use bodily experiences as a means to deepen some of the current scholarship around the relationship between practice, agency, and social structure as well as revisit the relationship between the body, bodily experience, and the act of knowing.

### ***The Body, Idioms of Pleasure, Practice, and Identification***

While an analysis of the circuit could take any number of foci, I am interested in how attendees negotiate through the gendered ideas and social relations that comprise the circuit as a means to obtain some degree of pleasure. What is the nature of this pleasure? Comments from Bill help to outline some of its contours:

Personally, I wouldn't have as much pleasure going into an event like that if it were filled with fifty percent of fat men or overweight people. I wouldn't get off on that. (Bill)

For Bill, the circuit's pleasures are undermined by the presence of fat *men or overweight people—I wouldn't get off on that*—suggesting, for Bill at least, the circuit's pleasures are bound to a particular, muscular aesthetic. Being unable, or unwilling, *to get off* on particular bodies suggests that the circuit's pleasures are more or less accessible—possible—in light of the various relations and positions one occupies. Taylor's experiences could be read as an effect of Bill's approach to the circuit:

Taylor and Brian are arguing. Taylor's point is that there is a privileged body, a privileged experience, one organised around muscle, a certain configuration of gender, and a willingness to give oneself up to the experience. Brian says to Taylor that the events are for everyone—"All you have to do is let go, enjoy it all." He goes on about his first time, saying that he felt really anxious and wasn't sure that he was going to have fun or fit in, but then finally "got it" when he relaxed. And Taylor responds with a question: "What does your position serve you? Why is it important to believe that idea?" I'm feeling bad about the difficulty Taylor has with the experience. I think it says more about how he perceives himself than it does about the circuit. I can recall him saying: "I don't want to go because I feel intimidated when all the guys take their shirts off. I feel small or fat or both." (Fieldnotes 1999)

As a man who does the circuit, and as a sociologist, I understand the capacity to actualise these pleasures as moments of agency. Brian's experience is clearly positive, one whose agency and empowerment is grounded in pleasurable experiences: *all you have to do is let go, enjoy it all*. Taylor's interpretation of the kind of pleasure available to him is, however, much more limited. *I don't want to go because I feel intimidated when all the guys take their shirts off. I feel small or fat or both*. Taylor is keenly aware that the ideas espoused by Bill—*I wouldn't have as much pleasure going into an event like that if it were filled with fifty percent fat men—do* organise the circuit. Together, these comments begin to suggest that part of the circuit's appeal—its pleasure—emerges through one's social position relative to certain normative, relatively objective, expectations about gender, attesting to the fact that the circuit is about power.

That the circuit is grounded in relations of power highlights that it is not completely guided by these normative expectations. Power necessarily implies or suggests struggle and negotiation and the pleasures possible through the circuit can be as

much about exercising and indexing agency as exercising and indexing constraint. While negotiating the circuit—navigating and living its various meanings—is fundamentally about celebration, play and pleasure, this negotiation-as-the-pursuit-of-pleasure is also intimately linked to social struggle. One of the major points around which this struggle occurs is the body and bodily experience—either over conceptualizations of the desirable body or what attendees do with or to their own bodies. I begin by suggesting that an account of practice that begins with the body as a point of analytical departure is a means to think through the devil of dualism. It is for this reason that I argue that the circuit, as a site of bodily pleasures, represents an excellent lens through which to think about the agency/structure debate.

### ***On Being an Insider and Method***

The methodological potential of this project stems from the fact that I identify myself as an “insider” and this research project as “insider research”. While it is clear that circuit parties can be differentiated from an everyday experience—you either attend a circuit party or you do not—the circuit experience has neither a centre nor a periphery and the distinction between an inside and an outside is, at best, an analytical one likely to occlude more than it reveals. The terms “insider” and “insider research” are hardly stable—to be an insider is, as Narayan (1993) notes, to be characterised “in terms of shifting identifications amid a field of interpenetrating communities and power relations” (Narayan 1993: 671). Along side this understanding, however, I also argue that my position as an insider—however contingent it might be—brings with it a wealth of methodological potential.

Following Abu-Lughod (1986, 1991, 1993) I chart out some of the particularities of the circuit experience. In doing so, I am not looking for themes or generalities; rather I evoke the complexity of the circuit and my relationship to comment on the ways in which my status as an “insider” to the circuit experience brings with it the chance to rethink or reframe how we understand the relationship between bodily experiences and representation. I begin by dancing:

The DJ is magic and I’m perfectly caught up in his music. And it’s not just me, everyone around me is pleasantly surprised by his mixing and programming. And while things started off with the music leading me,

creating enough space for me to move and feel good, making up for the not-so-great stuff from the night before, it reached that point where I'm almost leading the music. My hands reach out and it feels like the music is spilling from my fingers in traces of light. The music's not leading me, I'm leading it, and it's just perfect. But it's more than this—and I know this is crazy—but I am the music. I reach out and meet the sound at the right point, the right time, like the music and I are both thinking the same thing at the same time. Can music think? One wicked track after another crawls through my skin, my chest, up my arms and everyone is whooping and hollering again to finish a perfect seamless set of music. I have to stop, just for a second, and shake my head. All I can think is, "Wow! Wow! Wow!" How does this happen? This is very cool. I feel glamorous, perfect, like a smooth edge or rounded curve. I can count the number of times this has happened on one hand. Someone beside me is yelling through the music. "Russ, you own that! You own that! That was yours!" He's right. That small piece of music, the moment, I owned it. One of those few moments where the perfect balance of being high, surrounded by great people, music that has the right amount of edge to it—everything's just perfect. (Fieldnotes 1999)

Clearly, a moment of almost perfect identification—one I experienced not only internally, but a moment of belonging that was recognised, somehow, by others. This identification is not, however, simply limited to moments within the circuit party proper. Moments of identification are necessarily made meaningful in the context of discussion and reflection about circuit experiences:

They're still arguing about this. I say nothing here, let Taylor and Brian duke it out. They're both a bit frustrated and no point in me wading in on this. More importantly, I think, was how I was feeling during the whole thing. I contributed maybe 50 words to the entire conversation. There was a tight spot in my chest; I felt stuck to the spot. Why did it feel like I was being personally attacked? And it dawns on me that I'm identifying with what I'm studying—this hits me like a ton of bricks; I'm surprised that I didn't realise this sooner. Of course I identify with this stuff—this is where I have fun, where I do some of my socialising, where I hang out and dance with friends. I thought I felt most like an insider when I was on a dance floor covered in sweat and lost in dancing with muscle boys. But it was here, in a conversation over dinner, that I felt so strongly an insider. (Fieldnotes 1999)

Here, in a moment removed from the music, lights, and dancing bodies emerges an identification whose nature and depth surprised even myself. Taylor's argument makes complete sense—I have no doubt as to the authenticity of his experience. Yet I am torn here, between understanding him—indeed identifying with Taylor—and feeling



defensive. The intensity and contradiction of this identification is apparent in the metaphorical structure of these reflections: it secures me to the spot, leaves me unable to separate myself from the experience. Significantly, this moment of contradictory identification also highlights an important aspect of the circuit experience—this identification is not perfect or coherent.

Despite what amounts to an identification with the circuit, it is also important to note that my own sense of being a “circuit boy” is fraught with academic interest. My engagement with circuit and circuit-like experiences is never casual—lessons in sociology continually intrude, compelling me to think about the relationship between the dancing, identity, and desire in ways that hinder my pleasure—*I know he’s on to something*:

The walk with Trevor is pleasant. It’s after 7:00 in the morning. Very few people out and about. It’s cool, the wind and rain is light, feels like my skin is winking. Feels good to be out of the heat of the club space. Glad things are over. I’m quite tired and I’m looking forward to crawling into the hot tub with Trevor. The sense of relief at things being over is sort of overwhelming. How can I be relieved that I had so much fun? I suddenly feel like a sham, like I don’t belong—that all this is crap and I’m not supposed to be here. I confess this to Trevor. Do the drugs do this? I’m feeling vulnerable and achy, my head sort of rings and my ears are so sensitive—and I feel like I’m muffled, wrapped in thick heavy cloth. I don’t know where all this is coming from. I speak. “Sometimes I feel like a sham, like I don’t belong. As if I’m lying or pulling things over on people when I go out to these things.” I realise immediately that this borders on something I shouldn’t say. But I feel strangely safe with him. I know he thinks I think too much. “You just have to let go. When you start to think about it, that’s when you start to feel like....” He trails off. I finish the sentence for him. “A sham.” I begin to babble: about how I have to think about this, about how this is my research, about how this is my life in some strange sense—I stop talking for a moment. I’m not sure he gets it. Or that I’m making sense. And my mind trails off, thinking that this is a stupid thing to be studying, and why can’t I just have fun, and why do I always have to interrogate everything I do, and why can’t I just be casual about all of this. Why the hell does my life have to be such a petri dish for me? He asks, “Did you feel like a sham tonight?” And I think of that perfect moment: “Russ, you owned that.” I reply, “No. I didn’t.” But I do. The hot tub is exquisite. (Fieldnotes 1999)

Here, unlike the moment overhearing Taylor and Brian, my identification and sense of place falters on doubt and settles in ambiguity and contradiction. Do I feel like a sham or

inauthentic? *No. I didn't. But I do.* Moreover, this contradiction is often accompanied by questions about the truthfulness of my presence—a desire to belong but never quite feeling as though I do. At best, I feel like a circuit queen wannabe—I can pull off *the look*, but I'm never quite sure I'm doing it right. Or if I am, then it is an act, and I am going to get busted soon enough.

Self-doubts about the authenticity of my experience or position within the circuit are also, occasionally, accompanied by what amounts to a rejection of those around me. Frequently, I encounter a rate-limiting factor of understanding, where I approach those around me through lenses composed of limitations: I cannot understand, or I would not do that:

The two of them were going on about drugs, and I felt myself pull back and listen to what they were saying, I can think of this only as “opacity”. I hate the word Other here. But it seems to fit. Trevor said he was staying away from “things” for a while—“or at least crystal.” Said he really liked GHB and couldn't imagine forgetting about ecstasy. I could understand what amounted to Trevor's quasi-decision to not use drugs for a while—not to totally reject them—but at the same time I wanted to shake him. Tell him to be careful. Last month he was having anxiety attacks strong enough to keep him house bound for a week! For some reason this wasn't or didn't seem real—I was somehow unable (unwilling?) to understand what he was saying. (Fieldnotes 1999)

In the face of Trevor's negotiation through his own anxieties, my reaction was one of a relatively unmitigated and unapologetic rejection. *For some reason this wasn't or didn't seem real—I was somehow unable (unwilling?) to understand what he was saying. I wanted to shake him.* The conversation still leaves me disturbed about what, to my eye, seems to be a simple and straightforward decision about reckless and dangerous behaviour. At the same time, these moments of extreme distance—of dis-identification—are themselves never stable or coherent. To reflect on the experiences I cannot understand in others is often to have these experiences fold in on themselves, where I become alien to myself:

But who the fuck am I to say this to him when I do it? I've done this—have vowed to “never do crystal” again. Christ. After that party with Paul. What a nightmare. Felt like the world was coming down on me. I understand now that the anxiety was exacerbated by the strange distance between Paul and I, but Trevor was having a rough time with family and work as well. No different I suppose. It came out of nowhere really. I was

sitting at my desk unable to think. Scared out of my mind, my chest was crushing in, breathing suddenly became an effort and hard. A weight from everywhere—the roof, the sky, out of nowhere—something pressing down onto my back, my head. I wanted to cry, panic, run, but had no idea where to run or what to do. I ended up calling Paul to come and get me. He put me to bed, made me dinner. I was shaking there, in his green plaid comforter cover. Wanting my mother to hold me, wanting to go home where I would feel safe. He spoke to Ben on the phone, half laughing at me, mostly concerned, saying that I needed to be babied today. And I have no clue as to whether it was the crystal or the e or what it was. I've chosen to blame the crystal, but it could have been anything I was snorting or eating. And yet, I know I might take a bump of crystal again, at the beginning of a night, and not too much, but I know I would do it. But when does a night start and what's too much when you're higher than God? And at the same time, listening to Trevor and Brian, I'm thinking "That's not me, I won't do that. You are putting yourself in danger." But I do and did. (Fieldnotes 1999)

Trevor's incomprehensible experience is my own: *While I've stuck to my decision to never do crystal again, I'm equally aware that I might—just maybe inhale a bump—just a small one—if I'm attending a really great event.*

Regardless of my "objective" position—at an event or not—I experience moments of nearly perfect identification. At the same time, however, my identification with others and the whole idea of the circuit as an insider is never certain. Moments of doubt and rejection occur both on and off the dance floor. The distance between self and other is indeed short insofar as I reject what I do. To suggest I am inside or outside the circuit fails to account for the complexity of my—indeed any—circuit experience. I am neither insider nor outsider: I am both at once. In saying this, I do not deny that I have an insider's experience or that I am doing research from the inside. Clearly I am someone who is, in some sense, "in the know". I merely point out that my position is not one I occupy with any certainty. Rather it is one I occupy with shifting and various intensities of identification.

Thus, through my position as an uneasy insider, the point I wish to make and highlight is that a distinction between this project and the rest of my life as a circuit attendee is not easily made. I am, more or less, an academic who is, more or less, a circuit attendee—depending on where I am and what I am doing. Effectively, it is not clear when or at what point I approach the circuit as an academic—my approach and position have always been, in no simple way, that of an uneasy insider who to and fro

between critical engagement and bodily abandon. The important point is that this shifting—this to-ing and fro-ing—is my position and experience. As I have engaged with, and thought about, the circuit, I have also been struggling through the work of various social thinkers. My interpretation of the circuit and how the circuit might be most effectively understood has necessarily been informed by this academic engagement. At the same time, my academic engagement with the circuit was not so much something that I began as it was something I started to pay attention to with increasing scrutiny. I have, I realise, always been conducting an ethnography of the circuit—in a manner of speaking; thinking about what I have observed and overheard in terms of data.

### ***On the Implications of an Uneasy Identification***

In summary, to characterise myself as an “insider” doing “insider research” is, at best, a crude analytical distinction and at worst an analytical error. Having said this, however, it is clear that I experience the circuit as an insider, and simply to complicate the category “inside” does not fully engage with the implications being an “insider” has for my project. To be an insider and to do insider research is to be part of the object of inquiry and necessarily raises questions about how I conceptualise my object of analysis: I am (part of) the object of my analysis as well as the mode of my analysis. To think about the implications of this position, I introduce what Jackson (1989, see also 1983a, 1983b) calls radical empiricism and what Stoller (1989, 1997) calls sensuous scholarship. Both Jackson (1989) and Stoller (1989, 1997) argue for a mode of ethnographic inquiry that resists traditional empiricism and ethnographic realism. Traditional empiricism makes a clear distinction between the knowing subject and the known object, while ethnographic realism attempts to render the known object in abstracted, generalised, and totalised terms. In making a case against traditional empiricism and ethnographic realism, Jackson (1989) writes it is “fascinating and pertinent to note how the separation of subject and object in traditional empiricism is in large measure a function of the sensory mode and metaphor it privileges: vision” (p. 6).

The effect of this visual bias in traditional empiricism and ethnographic realism is an isolation of the viewer from the world—a denial of coevalness with the subject—and the abstraction of thought and categories of understanding from lived social context. Objects are separated from subjects and rendered intelligible through abstracted

frameworks that constrain and erase complexity. As a researcher and as a participant, I cannot engage in an edifying conversation about the circuit experience with the other-as-object. As an insider, as a gay man who does the circuit—however contested and contingent my position and identifications might be—I am privy to these non-abstracted experiences in ways that an “outsider” is not. I, like most circuit attendees, spend time preparing before heading off to a dance event—questions about what to wear, when to go, what to expect, and what to find are at the forefront of my mind. To be an insider is to have the resources and desire to engage in the bodily pleasures of the circuit in ways that other researchers may not be able to—it is to be able to conduct the kind of tasteful scholarship called for by Stoller (1989, 1997) and Jackson (1989). It is to be attentive to, and begin analysis with, the body and the circuit’s pleasures rather than beginning with what might be observed or theorised. Thus, my status as an insider brings with it a capacity to more easily engage in what Jackson (1989) calls radical empiricism and Stoller (1989, 1997) calls sensual ethnography, and what I think of as embodied ethnography.

### **(Re)Conceptualising the Circuit Experience**

At the same time, my uneasy identification brings with it an attention that is necessarily tempered by critical distance. This distance is certainly to be found among other circuit attendees—it is likely that most, if not all, circuit attendees experience similar shifts in identification. As an insider who is also a sociologist, I, however, am faced with deciding whether I will be taking my sociological hat with me onto the dance floor. And whether it is due to training and interest or misplaced assumptions about what it means to be a sociologist, I am never in a position where I do not take the hat with me. Whether on my head, tucked into my back pocket, or left at the coat check, my training and interest are always with me. So while most circuit attendees are likely to interpret and reflect upon their experiences and shifting forms of identification before, during, and after an event, they are not likely to be doing so in light of sociological concepts or as one interested in social research. That this status is necessarily uneasy creates enough space for an interpretation that is bound, but not limited, to emic frames of reference. It is on the basis of the uneasy critical distance I have to the circuit that I believe I am able to mount an argument for thinking about the circuit in a novel and critical manner.

I make an analytical distinction between circuit parties, or the circuit party proper, and the circuit experience. *Circuit parties* are relatively bounded social phenomena, occurring in particular places at particular times. They can be marked off from other similar large-scale dance events—like raves—by the fact that it is predominantly—indeed, almost entirely—gay men who attend them and by the strongly homoerotic, gay, and masculine ideas and social relations that characterise a circuit party. In light of this, I conceptualise the circuit party as a field of gendered symbolic and social relationships articulated and understood to be about celebration, play, and pleasure. I understand the *circuit experience* as the navigation through this field—a navigation which is more or less successful depending on a host of symbolic and social resources more or less available to various attendees. As attendees “do” the circuit, negotiating its ideas and social relations, they also come to embody these gendered meanings through practice. It is through this experience that a gendered sense of self is realised. That these negotiations are more or less successful points out that these experiences are not homogeneous and are premised, in many ways, on a struggle to somehow exist or have a presence within this field. As such, it is not simply that a gendered self is realised through the circuit experience. Rather, identification is fashioned, (re)affirmed, policed, and contested through the circuit.

In many respects, of course, one could identify when a dance event begins and ends: one is either at or not at a circuit party. The *meaning* of circuit events are not, however, constrained to that space—and it is, of course, the *meaning of the circuit* that is salient to a discussion of the nature of the circuit. Meanings are partially realised “outside” the circuit party experience. To have a meaningful circuit experience is not simply to attend a circuit party: a meaningful experience is necessarily contingent on being able to reflect on the circuit with those who are, in some sense, in the know. This rumination and reflection is meaningless without a shared experiential ground. The ideas and social relations associated with the circuit party proper come to inform self and community through memories and recollections of past experiences and the anticipation of future experiences. This is to say that the circuit experience bleeds into the everyday lives of attendees, informing attendees’ sense of self and community. As the tag line on a

compilation of music mixed by DJs known to spin circuit music reads, you can “take the party home with you.”

What this means in terms of circuit parlance is that the circuit is in no simple sense an escape from day-to-day living or an entry into celebration—as it is frequently glossed. This conceptualisation overlooks the significance the circuit experience has in the everyday lives of the men who attend them. For those who do the circuit, the cost—in terms of money and time—is considerable, and the emotional and intellectual reflections on the meaning and nature of the circuit experience infuse their everyday experiences of self and community. This is not to suggest that the circuit does not represent an escape—in ways I believe it clearly is. But to configure the circuit as simply an escape or a celebration would hide the way in which the pleasure associated with a circuit experience is (in)formed—indeed, made possible—by the larger normative order in which circuit parties are located.

Thus, while a circuit party is itself a necessary component of the circuit experience, it is not sufficient. The circuit experience is also made possible by a larger set of always already gendered power relations that feed into and contextualise circuit parties and life more generally. I understand this larger set of social relations to be hegemonic, privileging some configurations of sex, gender, and desire over others. This is not, however, to suggest that these normative notions remain uncontested or ossified. The circuit is a dynamic, complex phenomenon, with a great deal of variation between and within events. Events change in their organisation, change in their size and composition, become well known for some quality and criticised for another. This complexity is compounded by the differences within and between attendees in terms of social position and motivations. Despite this complexity, however, I would argue that the circuit experience is, if it is about anything, informed and organised by very precise understandings of sex, sexuality, and—most notably—gender.

In particular, I conceive of this broader set of gendered relations in and through which the circuit is situated as broadly heterosexist in nature, assuming the normalcy and naturalness of a heterosexual bond between men who are masculine and women who are feminine. This larger heterosexist matrix necessarily informs but does not determine the circuit experience. Thus, as much as circuit parties are spaces where *gay* men can come

together and celebrate who they are as gay men, these dance events are also bound to some relatively conventional, normative notions of what it means to be a *man*. This particularised experience is also bound to—but certainly not determined by—relations of class and race. In making the claim that the circuit experience privileges a particular configuration of identity, I am arguing that the circuit is intimately bound to and with relations of power—and hence social struggle.

## **A Look Ahead: Chapter Overview**

The structure of this project includes chapters devoted to analysis and reflection on the circuit, as well as three interleaving chapters whose focus is primarily theoretical—what I have chosen to call theoretical interludes. This organization functions to keep theory at the forefront of this analysis while holding on to what ethnographic methodology does so well—offering analysis through a detailed exploration of data and detail. I am as much interested in offering a novel (re)conceptualization and analysis of the circuit as I am in using the circuit to analyze and speak to theory and method. Thus, each of the interludes offers a means of reflecting on theory in the light of the circuit while the chapters offer a means of assessing theory and method from the perspective of lived experience of the circuit.

My first engagement with a circuit event left me puzzled; in the midst of thousands of gay men, I paused—stopped dancing—looked around at what I could only understand as a spectacle, and thought to myself: “How is this possible?” As one who was both part of “this” and as one with a social scientific bent, I understood that I was in a unique position to tell an interesting tale. Almost immediately upon engaging with the circuit, I began writing about it. An ethnographic approach was the only one that made any sense given that I was very much inside what suddenly stood out as a puzzle. Fieldnotes, jottings, headnotes, and the possibility of exploring particular details of experience as a means of illuminating larger cultural themes have been the means by which this analysis has been possible. In Chapter 1 I use fieldnotes to suggest that because the circuit is sensuous bodily experienced, any analysis of it must necessarily be conducted through a bodily register. This register emerges through the type of ethnographic engagement I have committed myself to—one that involves what Jackson (1989) calls radical empiricism and Stoller (1997) calls sensuous scholarship. It makes its



appearance in a participatory ethnographic engagement grounded in a commitment to seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling, and tasting the body through poetic processes of transcribing, revisiting, and elaborating bodily experiences and memories as fieldnotes. I close with some reflections on the concerns that may arise in light of this bodily engagement—in particular, the challenges that are likely to emerge in relation to sexual practices and drug use in a field that is, in many ways, about sex and drugs.

I then open my first theoretical interlude reflecting on Judith Butler's (1990, 1991, 1993a, 1993b, 1997, 1999) performative account of gender identity. Very broadly, she argues that identification and practice—what I understand as novel or innovative practices—are effects of a compulsion to reiterate normative gender ideals. Gender is thus an effect of discourse—and power is the ontological mechanism behind this effect. I turn to Butler's (1990) performative account for two reasons. On the one hand, it allows for a conceptualisation of identity and agency that places heteronormativity and heterosexism at the forefront of analysis. On the other hand, it brings to the foreground the body as a central component to who we are and how we act. Given the nature of the circuit—as a series of events that seem to be so clearly about the application of normative notions of what it means to be a gay man to the body and bodily experiences—I suggest Butler's (1990) account would be useful for understanding the link between the circuit, identification and practice.

Following this, I introduce two conceptual puzzles buried in Butler's framework. On the one hand, I point to the lack of attention she gives to the social conditions or social structures in which a performative reiteration of identity occurs. On the other hand, I suggest that her performative account only permits a constrained or negative notion of practice. I argue that while Butler does bring the body and bodily experience to the foreground in thinking about practice, these conceptual puzzles—or bugs—emerge from the fact that her attention to and conceptualization of the body and bodily experience is limited. I follow this with ethnographic observations and interview transcripts to illustrate what these bugs look like when Butler's analytical framework is used to think about lived experiences. I close this chapter by suggesting that Butler's contribution to thinking about practice and identification might be freed of these bugs if it were linked to

a conceptual scheme capable of attending more closely to the way innovative practice and identification are both socially and somatically embedded.

In Chapter 2, I turn to the details of the circuit experience as a means of laying the groundwork for developing this schema. It is in this fashion that I begin to use the circuit as a way of speaking to how we theorize practice and identification. I start by drawing on ethnographic fieldnotes and interviews to construct for the reader a sense of what the circuit is “about”. What emerges is an assessment of the circuit from the position of those most invested in it—that is, an assessment of the circuit from the point of view of attendees. In definitional terms, attendees understand circuit events to have relatively predictable organizational and technical aspects: size, length, number of events, a particular history, and focus. Analytically more important, however, is the relationship attendees construct between the circuit experience, identification, and community. The circuit is understood as a confirmatory celebration of shared difference, where more authentic connections between the self and others can occur. I close Chapter 2 by raising a concern about an analysis entirely based on emic interpretations: namely, that those most invested in the confirmatory experiences and aspects of the circuit—including myself—are unlikely to be able or willing to interrogate the circuit experience in any critical or novel manner. This reflection on both emic interpretations and my relationship to the circuit creates the momentum needed to introduce and justify using the work of Pierre Bourdieu as both a tool to think about the circuit and a tool to think through the ideas developed by Judith Butler. The sociology of Pierre Bourdieu—and in particular, his notions of habitus, field, and capital—represents a means of tending to the way practice is both socially and somatically embedded.

In Chapter 3, I capitalize on the momentum created at the end of Chapter 2 by exploring what I identify as alternative interpretations of the circuit—interpretations and assessments from those who might be regarded as outsiders—those who are more cautious of the circuit’s role in community and identity formation. The intention behind introducing alternative interpretations is to use them as a means of establishing some critical purchase from which to analyze or explore the circuit. What emerges through this consideration is, however, an inability to maintain the distinction between emic interpretation and alternative interpretations. The views of those with a positive

investment in the circuit and those who are more critical of the circuit are, in fact, constitutive of each other. Attendees respond to and rely on the analysis of outsiders who in turn draw upon the views and interpretations of those more positively invested in the circuit experience. Differently, those with any sort of interpretation of the circuit—positive or negative—are invested to some degree *in* the circuit experience and can be understood, in a very real way, as insiders.

Given that these interpretations—of those for and against the circuit, of those critical and those less critical of the circuit—emerge out of a real lived engagement with the circuit experience I am reluctant to prioritize any of these interpretations as more or less valid or rigorous. It would be hard and unfair to argue that those who wax positively about the circuit suffer from some sort of misperception about their experience or that critic's negative assessments are the misinterpretations of an outsider. This analytical decision brings with it two effects. On the one hand, the circuit, as an object of analysis, becomes quite large—any engagement with the circuit becomes part and parcel of the circuit experience and how the circuit is interpreted. Differently, all the interpretations of the circuit that might be mounted fall within the circuit experience. On the other hand, because portions of these interpretations come from within the scientific community, the analytical tools and approaches conventionally used for the purposes of critical analysis are somewhat suspect.

The expanded scope of the circuit as an object of analysis becomes exacerbated in light of what can be understood as the functional overlap between the circuit and other institutions urban gay men use as a means of affirming and maintaining a sense of self and community. Urban gay men's communities and senses of self are frequently built on or around engagements with gay or gay friendly gyms, bathhouses, and bars. This is not to suggest that all gay men rely on these institutions—merely to point out that these institutions form central components to a gay urban experience. Importantly, however, is that what these institutions achieve for gay men is not substantially different than that which the circuit achieves. This functional overlap means there is little to differentiate the circuit from other sites of identity and community confirmation, rendering the circuit as an object of analysis with very large borders. It is in this fashion that I begin to push for a (re)conceptualization of the circuit experience. Thus I close Chapter 3 with a

question: where is critical purchase to be found in light of the suggestions that interpretations of the circuit are, in a fundamental way, the interpretations of invested insiders and that these interpretations do little to differentiate the circuit from other institutions within gay men's urban experiences?

In Chapter 4, I pick up this question by turning to some of the ideas proffered by Pierre Bourdieu, particularly his notion of a "reflexive sociology"—a methodological approach designed to interrogate how the analyst's relationship to the object of study can confound or constrain analytical possibilities—or, more simply, produce bias. On the basis of this reflexive turn, I suggest that the complexity of the circuit as an object of analysis—as one that is very large and difficult to differentiate from other sites of community and identity confirmation—might be understood in terms of what Bourdieu identifies as the problem or trap of the "preconstructed" object. In raising the trap of the preconstructed object, Bourdieu is referring to the way the researcher's relationship to an object of analysis risks producing biased interpretation of that object, an interpretation that is an effect of the analyst's relationship to the object rather than any quality of the object itself. This concern with bias is part and parcel of Bourdieu's larger research agenda: "The principle concern—and longstanding preoccupation of Bourdieu—is the need to control the relationship of the researcher to the object of inquiry so that the position of the researcher is not unwittingly projected into the object of study" (Swartz 1997: 272).

For Bourdieu, there are three kinds of bias to which the researcher should attend. At one level there is the bias that comes from the particular social location of the researcher—bias attributed to class, race, gender, or sexual orientation. At a second level, there is the bias that emerges from the fact that social research is as much about social struggle as it is about intellectual inquiry. "Reflexivity for Bourdieu means cultivating an awareness that one's intellectual position and work also represent strategies in this struggle for scholarly recognition" (Swartz 1997: 273). This is to suggest that one's position within a particular discipline is liable to produce interpretations that are as much about the priorities of that discipline and the need to publish as they are about the object of inquiry. At a third level is what Bourdieu calls an intellectualist bias, "which entices us to construe the world as a spectacle, as a set of significations to be interpreted rather

than as concrete problems to be solved practically” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 39). For Bourdieu, social research demands a withdrawal from the social world, pulling the analyst away from the actual logic of practice to favour theoreticist logic. Here, bias emerges as the logic of the analyst replaces the logic of practice.

Bourdieu’s call for a reflexive sociology is organized around minimizing this bias by constructing “scientific objects differently” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 42). By different, Bourdieu means to construct the object of analysis in a conscious and deliberate manner, ensuring that the object taken by the analyst is not an effect of the researcher’s location in the social world, of the relationship between the researcher and academic foci, or an effect of an approach that begins by thinking of the object in terms a spectacle or set of meanings to be interpreted, divorced from the logic of that practice. Bourdieu relies on what he calls relational thinking to assist in this construction project, arguing the object present to the analyst is itself made possible by a host of social relations in which the researcher is situated and which extends beyond the analyst and the object itself. Any object of analysis must be understood as an elongation or expression of a set of social relations that stretch beyond the present moment and any conceptualization which does not attend to the way experience is made possible by these relations falls into the trap of the preconstructed object.

Thus, relational thinking involves understanding that the true object of sociological analysis is not this object per se, but the way in which the object is produced by and situated within these broader social relations. To assist in the task of thinking about the circuit in relational terms, and thus avoid the trap of the preconstructed object, I draw on two analytical strategies suggested by Bourdieu: first, attending to the collective work and struggle that has gone into the construction of the object of analysis and second, comparing the object of analysis to other related objects. Both strategies render the preconstructed object in relational terms, making visible the broader social conditions—which are, for Bourdieu, the true objects of sociological investigation—that make that object possible in the first place. In Chapter 4, I adopt these strategies in relation to the circuit experience. This relational approach functions to highlight two aspects of the circuit experience that need to be foregrounded if the “truth” of the circuit—the social relations in which it is embedded—is to be adequately understood.

Attending to the work that has gone into constructing and interpreting the circuit reveals two important issues. On the one hand, it becomes apparent that interpretations of the circuit are situated within and made possible by a broader field of gay history, academic and journalistic pursuits, and the history and structure of the AIDS pandemic as it applies to gay men. In short, the circuit is a social field much broader than the circuit party proper. On the other hand, it becomes apparent that these interpretations are also grounded in a particular conceptualization of the subject—one that assumes a rational, self-reflexive subject capable of self-knowledge, one that identifies the social world as series of challenges and opportunities through which the subject might negotiate. The circuit, however, brings this conceptualization of the subject into question. The intense visceral, bodily experiences of the circuit seem to defy attendees' attempts at capturing and reflecting on the experience. Attendees are reduced to clichés: *you just have to be there to understand*. Without engaging either the relational nature of the circuit experience or this intense bodily experience any analysis of the circuit will remain constrained to the preconstructed object.

A comparison of the circuit with other institutions associated with gay men's urban communities further assists in thinking about the circuit in relational terms. In the latter portion of Chapter 4, I note that in my initial comparison of the circuit, gay (friendly) gyms, baths, and bars I highlighted functional properties, where the circuit seemed to be about community and identity confirmation. Given my status as an insider, as one interested in community and identity formation, I searched for, and found, ways in which the circuit contributed to community and identity (de)formation. Thinking in relational terms, it becomes possible to understand this functional interpretation as an aspect of the trap of the preconstructed object. Differently, my relationship to the circuit as an insider functioned to produce these interests and this focus. While it is relatively easy to argue that the circuit shares many functional aspects with gay (friendly) gyms, bathhouses, and nightclubs in terms of community and identity (de)formation, such an analysis glosses over some rather profound structural properties—size, scope, number of participants: what might be summed up as the *magnitude* of the circuit. What is significant is that attendees experience the magnitude primarily in bodily and affective terms, suggesting that at the core of the debates about the circuit is the body's role and

place in struggles for community and identity confirmation. In Brian's words, while the circuit might be about community and identity, it is also, significantly, about *flaunting the body* in relation to community and identity.

Two analytical constraints emerge as a result of these ruminations. First, relational thinking highlights the broader social conditions that make the circuit experience possible and sensible, making it difficult to think about the circuit entirely in terms of the structures and meanings of the circuit party proper. Second, given the centrality of the bodily experience in the circuit, there is enough reason to suggest that practice and identification are more complex than the conceptualization of a rational subject negotiating through a set of social structures allows for. These limitations generate two analytical imperatives. On the one hand is a need to conceptualize the circuit in a way that does not limit analysis to the circuit party proper—that steers analysis away from the preconstructed object to a consideration of the broader conditions of which the circuit is merely an elongation or expression. On the other hand, it is necessary to think about practice and identification in terms of the intense bodily or visceral nature of the circuit. The challenge thus becomes how to explain practice and identification in a way that is not, on the one hand, constrained to the circuit party proper and, on the other hand, able to foreground the body and bodily experience?

The reflexive process on which this challenge—and this reconceptualization of the circuit as an object of analysis more generally—is based does more than account for bias. This active construction of the circuit as an object of analysis also functions to conceptualize the circuit in a way that makes Bourdieu's notions of field, habitus, and capital sensible. The usefulness of these concepts in relation to the circuit lies in the way his notions of field and capital—as a way of thinking about social relations—and his notion of habitus—as a way of thinking about the body's relationship to field and capital—come together as a means of explaining the logic of practice. In the second theoretical interlude, I introduce Bourdieu's most famous conceptual tripartite analytical schema and explain how these three concepts can be applied through a field analysis. These three concepts do more, however, than offer a means of thinking about the intersection of larger social relations and the body as practice. They also help orient the analyst to a very precise question or puzzle—what Bourdieu calls the “paradox of doxa”

(Bourdieu 2001: 1). One of the central questions occupying Bourdieu's attention is the way systems of domination and control operate with very little resistance and without much recognition on the part of either those who rule or those ruled. Thus, given the normative expectations associated with the circuit, Bourdieu's' notions are particularly apt.

In Chapter 5, I begin applying this mode of analysis to interview data and ethnographic observations, beginning with an understanding of the circuit as a field of interpretive struggle. The intent is to use notions of field, habitus, and capital to both explain practice and identification in relation to a broader set of hierarchical and normative social relations as well as help reveal how these interpretive struggles contribute to the perpetuation of these social relations. I highlight two aspects of the circuit as a field of interpretive struggle. On the one hand, I explore how both homophobic and pro-gay critics struggle over the meaning of circuit. I point out that the pro-gay critic frame practice in terms of either an effect of the social structures/meanings of the circuit or an effect of a subject's capacity to negotiate through structures. I argue that these interpretations of the circuit—interpretations that are in effect explanatory models—function to decontextualize the circuit as an object of analysis by constraining attention to the dynamics of the circuit party proper. The analytical implications are important: framing the circuit as a set of structures that shapes practice or to think about practice in terms of a subject's capacity to choose in relation to this structure is to remain committed to the preconstructed object. This overlooks the broader conditions which constitute the circuit as a social space. I suggest that while critics think about the circuit experience in terms of the structures and meanings of the circuit party proper they forget or gloss over bodily experience. Unexamined are the social conditions that make the circuit sensible. Homophobic interpretations and power rely on these broader conditions—and by failing to think about these conditions, the pro-gay critic helps support these conditions of domination.

On the other hand, I also explore how attendees struggle over *the look*—the normative buffed and muscled aesthetic associated with the circuit experience. Most attendees are in general agreement that *the look* represents a problem in the context of the circuit. It is an impossible ideal that functions to fracture both the self and community.



Despite this general assessment, however, attendees regularly minimize *the look* as an organizing structure rather than reject it by suggesting that the challenge is to develop the right attitude toward *the look* and what it means. There are two noteworthy aspects to this strategy. On the one hand, as attendees minimize *the look* they replicate the circuit's aesthetic hierarchy. By maintaining *the look*—even in a minimized form—the logic of the circuit is perpetuated. On the other hand, the problem of *the look* is also understood to be a problem of meaning and interpretation, a problem whose solution rests in the subject's capacity to exercise his will or agency in relation to this meaning. These minimization strategies thus background the body and bodily experiences in favour of cognitive considerations.

I close Chapter 5 by rendering these classificatory struggles in terms of Bourdieu's notion of symbolic violence: these interpretive struggles—academic or otherwise—are implicated in perpetuating a larger normative order that extends beyond the confines of the circuit party proper. I also point out that as interpretations of the circuit—academic or otherwise—these classificatory struggles circulate around but fail to address the centrality of the body and bodily experience within the circuit. I suggest that if the bodily aspects of the circuit are not taken into consideration, practice and identification will remain unclear. To think about the circuit in terms of the broader conditions that make the circuit a possibility and the bodily experience through which this possibility is practiced I continue with Bourdieu's notion of a field analysis in Chapter 6. I open with a brief discussion of his notion of homology—a concept that allows for a leap to be made from the circuit party proper to the broader set of social conditions that make the circuit possible and sensible. I use this notion to help make sense of what Bourdieu identifies as the field of power—the theoretical ensemble of which the preconstructed object is always an elongation. The task for Bourdieu always rests in using the preconstructed object to “adumbrate” the nature of the field of power—for Bourdieu, the quintessentially sociological task (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 233). Unlike Bourdieu, however, who tends to frame the field of power in terms of economic and cultural factors (wealth and education), I think of the field of power—as it relates to the circuit—in terms of gendered power relations. I turn to Butler, and her notion of the heterosexual economy of desire, as a means of conceptualizing this field of power.

In using Butler's notion of the heterosexual economy of desire as a means of conceptualizing the conditions that make the circuit experience a possibility, I am, of course, suggesting a synthesis. By bringing Butler to bear on Bourdieu, it becomes possible to extend the analytical potential of his analysis—his work on gender and sexual identification is quite constrained. At the same time, this synthesis also functions as a solution to the limitations associated with Butler's work. It is in this way that I return to the challenges set out at the end of the first theoretical interlude. By conceptualizing the heterosexual economy of desire as the field of power, Butler's analytical framework is rendered in social as well as symbolic terms—through the notions of field and capital—and is able to incorporate the body and bodily experience, via the notion *habitus*. Thus, through Bourdieu, Butler's account is both social and somatic in its organization.

Thus as much as the heterosexual economy of desire allows for a way of thinking about the field of power in terms that highlight gender and sexual identification, the field also offers a way of thinking about the heterosexual economy of desire in terms that are both material/social as well as attentive to the somatic dimensions of identification and practice. I construct this synthesis with the assistance of the voices of those interviewed and those with whom I engaged with during my fieldwork—again focusing on how attendees negotiate through *the look*. I use these voices and the knowledge of the logic of the heterosexual economy of desire to illustrate how the circuit experience, through *the look*, is an expression of this larger theoretical ensemble. What emerges is an understanding of the circuit as an elongation of the heterosexual economy of desire.

While a synthesis of Butler and Bourdieu is productive for exploring the relationship between identification, practice, and a larger heteronormative order in a way that seems to address the bodily nature of the circuit experience, I note that both thinkers have already engaged with each other in such a manner as to suggest that a synthesis might be impossible. In many regards both thinkers reject aspects of each other's analytical framework and starting points. I argue, however, that by carefully investigating the way these two thinkers approach each other's work, it is possible to continue the process of deepening or extending the analytical possibilities of each thinker. To that end, I argue that despite the fact that both thinkers bring the body and bodily experience into their account of identification and practice, both have difficulty articulating a clear

or consistent relationship between bodily experience, identification, and practice. I suggest that a consistent and coherent account of the role of the body and bodily experience requires a shift in analytical emphasis. In their accounts, both thinkers, in different ways, use the body as a way of bridging the gap assumed to exist between agency and structure, micro and macro, the individual and society. Following Shilling (1997b), I argue that rather than assuming a gap between agency and structure, a more productive starting place is the assumption that the body informs the social world and is informed by that world. Instead of using the body to figure out how agency and structure come together, this assumption allows for an understanding of the body as agentic, as a source or motivation for identification and practice.

To talk about the body as an agent, as something that has an effect that is distinct from agency and/or structure, I turn to Axel Honneth's (1995) analysis of social recognition. Honneth suggests that what motivates subjects to action is a struggle for social recognition. What I take from his account of identity and practice that incorporates the body and bodily experience in a way that attends to the subject's social embeddedness. I close this chapter by suggesting that by bringing these three thinkers together, it becomes possible to think about practice and identification in bodily terms, terms that are grounded in both material and symbolic structures. In light of the hegemonic social structure of the circuit, what is negotiated and struggled for, and more or less realised through the circuit experience, is a social presence or recognition. I understand this desire and struggle for social recognition to be one of the core social structures accounting for practice within the circuit and the social world more generally (Honneth 1995). As an account of practice, the struggle for recognition is also an account of identity or identification. Importantly, this struggle is registered through the body and the pleasures available to it. As an emotional/affective experience, the pleasures associated with social recognition are necessarily a somatic, bodily experience. This framing offers a way of thinking about practice that *begins* with bodily experiences, moving through the dualistic debates and traps associated with structural constraint or individual choice.

# Chapter 1

## *“Honey that’s why you do this with friends.”*

In this chapter, I use fieldnotes to detail the way in which friendship, community, and bodily pleasures are a central component of the circuit. In so doing, I consider how my engagement with these issues informs my research practice and choices. As a participant and member of the “circuit community”, my engagement is not simply analytical. It is also an exercise in building and making friendships and community. This necessarily informs the way I gather and think about my data. Given the intense bodily nature of the circuit and the fact that this research project is one based on writing, representing the circuit presents some challenges. It is difficult to apprehend the intense, visceral pleasures associated with the circuit through text and even more difficult to represent these pleasures in a medium that is almost antithetical to bodily pleasures. Thus, understanding the circuit requires a particular methodological commitment to use the circuit’s pleasures and bodily experiences as part of the research process. This methodological commitment means conducting ethnographic practice organised through a participatory bodily engagement with the circuit. In the following sections I elaborate on these themes as well as begin offering the reader a sense of what the circuit is “about”.

## **New Year's Eve, 1997 (I)**

My first brush with anything that could be construed as circuit-like was a local New Year's event I attended with my partner shortly after we had moved from Saskatoon to Vancouver. Brian had found employment in Vancouver; I had been accepted to graduate school. New to the city, we had little sense about what to do or how to ring in the New Year. Brian's place of work had a large gay and lesbian clientele, and after hearing that the two of us did not have any ideas about what to do, one of his clients, Jaret, suggested we attend what he and some of his friends had planned. There was talk of a party and a pre-party before hand. Vaguely, both Brian and I understood that this would be, as New Year's bashes go, a dance of some sort. Like countless gay men, we had met in a dance club and the idea of gay men gathering together to dance in the New Year was not novel. Jaret arranged for tickets and there was the discussion between he and Brian, relayed back to me, about trying ecstasy. Again, like countless others, recreational drug-use was neither new nor surprising for either of us—although the use of ecstasy was. I can remember being curious, having heard or read about the drug in vague off-hand ways. The tickets and a small clear plastic zip-lock bag showed up a few days later:

The pre-party was being held at a friend of Jaret's. Jaret suggested we meet at his place and he would walk over with us. We arrived at Jaret's and were greeted by his boyfriend. We were, apparently, a bit early—we woke Peter from a nap and Jaret was not yet back from whatever errands he had to do. I learned later that Jaret had been helping set up the dance party we were to attend that night. Peter invited us in, asked if we wanted a drink. Peter quickly learned that this was the first time either of us would have tried ecstasy. A light went on in his eyes: "Oh. Oh, you guys are going to have such a good time. It's such an amazing experience. Honey, the first time is just amazing. We'll take care of you. Everything will be just perfect. Tonight is going to be amazing. Your first trip is amazing. I love seeing people taking ecstasy for the first time. Remember to drink plenty of water—the ecstasy and dancing can dehydrate you if you're not careful."

I can remember being a bit perplexed; Peter's enthusiasm seemed inflated or out of place. Like most people with any exposure to recreational drugs, we—or at least I—had heard about ecstasy and its effects: feelings of joy and euphoria, love, and sexual energy. But joy and sexual energy are things I had experienced with other drugs. Both Brian and myself had spent enough time dancing in night-clubs while on drugs such that the

idea was not overwhelming. Peter grabbed a glass of water for himself, turned on some music, and said he was going to change. Brian turned to me: “My God. It’s just a party people. What is this?” I shrugged.

Jaret returned shortly after that and we made our way to the pre-party, a few blocks away. At one level, it was a standard house party thrown during the holiday season: a Christmas tree, a few opened gifts under it, simple holiday decorations here and there, candles, a small buffet covered in finger-foods. The rest of the condo was tastefully put together, lived in, neat, comfortable. Something I imagined having at one point in my life. There were, however, a few novel elements to this otherwise standard New Year’s Eve house party. It was, of course, attended entirely by gay men, standing in small groups talking, joking, and drinking. While not unexpected or a surprise, it was new for Brian and myself to enter someone’s home and find it *full* of gay men. Saskatoon did not offer us the opportunity to socialise entirely or even primarily with gay men and to be in a room full of them was, well, different. There were also two other characteristics that struck me almost immediately. The first was the way in which everyone seemed to have—at the very least—some degree of familiarity with each other. As gay men are wont to do, greetings were punctuated with kisses and broad friendly hugs, indexing—to me at any rate—a shared history. The overall tone was one of comfort and encompassing warmth. The second thing I noticed was that this room was full of good-looking adult men. All were in their early thirties and seemed to have a degree of maturity about them.

In many ways, these observations and characteristics are, of course, banal. To attend a New Year’s Eve party in Vancouver’s West End in which the guests and hosts are adult gay men who knew each other is not, by any stretch of the imagination, unusual. But the banal is relational and this was anything but business as usual for me. Until my move to Vancouver, interacting with gay men was a rarity. The majority of my own small circle of friends in Saskatoon was straight and Brian’s connection to a gay circle of friends was equally limited. This isn’t to suggest that Brian and I didn’t associate with gay men in Saskatoon, only that for whatever reason, we could count the number of gay men we knew on one hand. Moreover, up until this moment, the degree of warmth and camaraderie among gay men I was witnessing was something I had only imagined. I had no doubt that what I was witnessing around me at this pre-party was what gay men “did”, but, I was never able to find “this” in Saskatoon. At the same time Saskatoon is a university town and Brian and I were both students. Consequently, those around us fell into the standard twenty to twenty-five year old age brackets. For what I believe was the first time in my life, I was in the company of gay men who, it appeared to me, were living as adults. Metaphorically and literally, I was wide-eyed, and at the risk of overstatement, this pre-party was a different part of the forest, and these animals were entirely new.

For a variety of reasons, I found conversation difficult. Never good at small-talk socialising, my move to Vancouver, where I was faced with meeting entirely new people for the first time in years, taxed me to my conversational and social limits. Brian, on the other hand, was better at this sort of thing—funny, more outgoing. At another level, and in all fairness to my own perceived lack of conversational skills, the topics up for discussion were ones I found I could not fully participate in. These were mostly men who worked—if not nine to five jobs, then at least ones that afforded them some degree of economic security. Vacations, skiing, buying cars, prices of condominiums, and work related issues were things that, with my history as a student, I felt I could not contribute to. Moreover, there existed a certain density to these men’s relationships—the banter and conversational points were tight, circular, internal. It was clear that some of these men had known each other, in some capacity, for years. Further complicating this was the tone of the references of what was going to take place tonight—who had decided to come, where people were staying, references to music, and the party itself. These guys were buzzing with an almost electric excitement about the rest of the evening that seemed out of place given that it was, in my estimation, merely a dance. Jaret chatted with us for a while—about Christmas, the gym and then introduced us to Bob from Seattle. He was in a similar situation, saying he didn’t know many people here. He was, however, very excited about the rest of the evening; all he wanted to do was get dancing. I recall being unable to frame or place the degree of anticipation that I sensed. I imagined it would be fun, but Bob was vibrating.

Brian and I stood near the fireplace, leaning against the back of a leather sofa, and talked—about what I’m not sure—but were mostly quiet, myself feeling quite graceless. Pictures on the mantle piece attracted my eye. Bright photos in neat wood frames: the hosts on the beach with some of the people presently in the room; men arm in arm at what I imagined was a Gay Pride celebration; dressed up in Halloween costumes; gathered around a dinner table. All of them smiling. Looking back at ourselves, I’m not so sure that Brian and I were as awkward as I felt we were, although I do imagine that some probably saw us as feeling uneasy. I’m not sure if it was because Jaret neglected to introduce us to those around us, or if he did and I simply forgot that he did, or if he just gave up on us because we seemed so out of place, but I do remember keenly feeling both the farthest and closest I had ever been to something I had imagined and desired since coming out. Life back home was missing what I was seeing at this rather banal holiday party: gay men together as a group, chatting, hugging, filled with camaraderie, laughing, sharing with ease what I imagined was friendship. These gay men were living their lives—or at least the part I was witnessing—in a way that I had always imagined wanting my life to be. I stood in the middle of this pre-party, leaning against a sofa and could feel in the most frightening and tangible way the fine edge of something I

had—after seven years of being “out”—yet to experience: a sense of community and belonging among my own kind. (Fieldnotes 1998)

### *Writing into Community*

So there I stood face to face with what I had desired—a *sense of community and belonging among my own kind*—and had no idea of how to engage with it. My initial attempt came, tellingly enough, from my position as a student. I chose to write about it, first creatively and privately and then more publicly as part of my doctoral requirements. This experience and those that followed in and around the dance experience seemed ripe for analysis. I quickly came to identify this engagement as “fieldwork” and when asked what my dissertation focus was, I readily began replying “I’m doing an ethnography of the circuit experience”. Turner (1985) identifies fieldwork as “a period during which people negate, affirm, and create meaning and (at times mystically) participate in native life” (Turner 1985, cited in Jackson 1995: 70). Fieldnotes are an intimate part of the meaning making nature of fieldwork in general and my own fieldwork in particular. There seems to be little information, except that which exists in introductory methods texts, on the nature of fieldnotes other than the suggestion that fieldnotes are the recordings made by an ethnographer while in the field (except see Sanjek 1990). My own experience with the idea and practice of fieldnotes was also limited by virtue of disciplinary training. The ideas and complexities associated with ethnography and fieldnotes are, for the most part, the purview of cultural anthropologists, not sociologists. Thus, without a great deal of guidance as to what constitutes fieldnotes, except the understanding that they should be about an empirical referent, I carried my previous understandings of writing over to how I approached fieldnotes.

Significantly, I understand writing not to be about a display of knowledge. I take seriously Thompson’s (1994) and Adam’s (1986) suggestion that writing and re-writing are processes of making and finding meaning rather than a display of what one knows. Seldom, if ever, do I come to the page with an idea already formed. I write as a means to understand my object of inquiry and myself and any display of knowledge is an effect of writing, not its goal. In writing, reading, and re-writing this passage I not only describe a series of events but also render this experience meaningful for myself. As I imagine most writers do, I tack back and forth between what I have written, what I have learned



through the writing, and the object of my inquiry in a process of writing, reading, editing, and re-writing. This to-ing and fro-ing is the mechanism by which my meanings, knowledges, and understandings emerge—it is the means by which I produce data. Thus, to do this kind of writing is to make this project not simply about representing and analysing the already existing meaning of the circuit experience, but it is also to engage in a process of making the circuit meaningful for myself. Inevitably, this process leads to questions about the experience and the writing of the experience.

These questions are manifestations of what Sanjek (1990) calls headnotes—the ongoing internal meaning-making dialogue the ethnographer has about his or her research topic—and they are necessarily connected to a variety of personal and not so personal interests on the part of the ethnographer. My own ever-changing body of ideas, mutterings, and nascent thoughts associated with the circuit experiences was and is linked to a desire to find and make sense out of something I had—after seven years of being “out”—yet to experience, but desperately desired: a sense of community and belonging. This more private interest, in addition to a more scholarly interest of using these fieldnotes in pursuit of a doctorate, necessarily informs the nature and direction of my fieldnotes.

Insofar as my fieldnotes emerge out of the practice of writing, lived experience, and desire, they are rhetorical and interpretive meaning making documents *as well as* referential and analytical documents. To say that my fieldnotes are a part of an interpretive exercise grounded in a desire to build meaning and community is to point out that this dissertation is not only about a set of scholarly or academic interests. It is also about a personal journey on my part in making this community meaningful and in some fashion, contributing to this community. These notes are thus rhetorical in the sense that they are about a desire to construct a meaningful place in what I witnessed, for the first time, on New Year’s Eve. This project and the role of writing fieldnotes are tools in this journey. At an analytical level, I am interested in understanding the nature of the circuit experience, and the connections between these events, community, and identity.

## **New Year’s Eve, 1997 (II)**

Shortly before midnight, Jaret began to organise some of us to leave. He was anxious to be at the event before midnight. Coats were gathered and

shoes put on as we bundled ourselves into the elevator. The party itself was located at a small Armoury. A short line worked its way into the huge double doors and to the left as we walked up to the building was an ancient World War One tank cemented to the sidewalk. A blue corridor of light welcomed those closest to the door and music thudded from somewhere inside the building.

Tall partitions had been set up to accommodate the flow of people as they entered from the front door, guiding us past a coat check. A small crush of men stood in front of tables as staff frantically exchanged tickets for coats and jackets. The partitions guided us along one edge of the Armoury's giant parade space, past a few tables and booths selling alcohol and drinks. Jaret walked ahead, leading us around the partitions, through a small crowd of people, to the edges of what was a dance floor. To our left, flanked by two large metallic knights, was a scaffolding set-up supporting turntables and other equipment. Head phones half on, hands busy with something in front of him was, I imagined, the DJ. Short podiums in front of him supported well-built go-go dancers. From the ceiling hung thick long streams of silver mylar and in the corners of the parade space were four tall speaker stacks belting out some of the best music I think I had ever heard. Against the farthest wall ran a small balcony. I was surprised: the set up seemed professional—smart and sophisticated. I felt provincial.

Jaret suggested we move up to the balcony. The view captured the entire dancefloor and in hindsight, I'm sure that Jaret wanted to give us this view. A few people were dancing in front of the DJ; others were slowly joining, swelling the size of the crowd. I strained my eyes: all of them were men. Jaret half-whispered, half-yelled over the music into my ear that we could probably take the ecstasy now. I pulled the small plastic bag out and fiddled with it until the two gel caps found their way into my palm. I was vaguely apprehensive but quickly went through a list of other drugs I had tried—acid, pot, mushrooms—and thought “whatever” as I ate the little gel cap. Brian was tenser about the prospect of trying something unknown and swallowed his with a mouthful of water a bit later. I asked Jaret what to expect. “Oh, you'll know it when it hits you. Make sure you're with Brian. It's quite beautiful. It can be pretty special when you're together. You two should be together.” He pointed down to the dancefloor, near one of the speaker stacks, laughing, “Look at Bob. He's already at it.” Bob was near the closest speaker stacks, dancing intently to the rumble of the music. His movements were hard, and fierce—a ball of moving male energy. Jaret excused himself, said he was going to dance. Brian and I remained on the balcony—I am a consummate people-watcher and the balcony offered a perfect view. I was also interested in remaining still to feel the ecstasy do whatever magic it was supposed to do. Jaret appeared below us, went up to Bob and then pointed to us above. Bob waved and smiled, then turned into the music, eyes closed.

The crowd below slowly began to swell and the music intensified and then settled into a driving rhythm. For the second time that night I noted the quality of the music. Unlike anything I had heard at clubs before. Brian and I checked in with each other as we watched what was below us: “Are you feeling anything yet?” Were my ears tingling? Below, the small crowd of dancers grew in size and density: men made their way into the moving mass from the edges of the dance floor. Short screams or whistles of appreciation erupted as the DJ mixed one track seamlessly into the next. Hands held high in the air, curled into fists, pounding the air. Some began removing their shirts: reaching to their waist, crossing their arms, grabbing their T-shirts and stripping in one swift motion. A quick fold and the shirt was tucked into a back pocket or waistband. I do not want to overstate my naivety here: I had been in enough gay dance clubs and gay men dancing and stripped to the waist were a familiar sight. Surprising though was the density of the crowd, and from this vantage-point, its sameness. Almost all the dancers below were shirtless and all were, in my estimation, stunningly beautiful: a study in the clean lines and chiselled angles of muscle—biceps, broad shoulders, racks of abdominal muscles that seemed impossibly perfect.

With the lights, the entire crowd looked like one large organism, carpet-like and pulsing, red and flesh coloured, blue and orange, green and purple, a haze of smoke seemed to bind everyone together. The dance floor breathed and whispered seduction. My skin tingled—the same feelings I had when I saw work by Attila Richard Lukacs. Warm fingers of blood flushed along my chest, reached deep into my guts and held onto my stomach as the bottom of my world dropped out from beneath my feet. My lungs refused to fill with air; the beautiful licking mass of men below the balcony, the lush warmth of the drug that was everywhere and nowhere sucked my breath from me. I followed it. The universe winked. Green and red lasers sliced through the crowd, danced on the ceiling, arced across my eyes, snapping me back to the balcony. I noticed I was moving to the music—dancing?—when did that happen? Jaret was whispering and yelling into my ear again. He had returned to check in on us: “How are you feeling?” Good. Very, very good. “This is an amazing drug.” He smiled, “You have no idea yet.” Every dot of light and disco dance note exploded into entire worlds. Colours, light, sound, the prickle and sparks on my skin, everything played into an impossible perfection. I had never been so aware of my body; the complex knot my senses had become left me gripping the balcony railing with white knuckles. Jaret suggested that we dance.

A peculiar pleasure stole over me as I watched the dance floor unfold around me. Music and dancing had never been this good, and I had never been surrounded by this many good-looking men—well built, muscular, adult men—having fun in a way that seemed, by some trick of gender, to be about being men. Many hugged each other as they greeted one another, offering quick kisses as they moved on and off the dance floor. Playful

men smiling and delighted. Those around me were slick with sweat and shone blue red purple white in the arcs and flashes of intelligent lights. Others crushed into each other in tight clutches of three or four, grinding out slow rhythms to music that was even better than a few moments ago. Hands reached out, pulled me into heavy arms, rubbing all the right places—shoulders, my lower back. I held handfuls of muscle and tasted sweat. Brian yelled into my ear: “This is incredible!” He laughed, “All I got Jaret was a bottle of wine! Christ I’m glad I’m gay! Straight people would never get this.” Time tinkered with me as my mind and body blinked from here to there. Jaret reached his arm around my shoulder and put one of his hands very close to my face. He was holding something in his palm. “Here, put this under one of your nostrils and inhale hard. It’ll burn a bit.” He handed me a small bit of plastic that could have been a toy. Without a second thought I inhaled a small sharp storm that seared the back of my throat. “What is it?” My eyes smarted a bit and my throat filled with the acrid taste of chemical. “Special K”. The name was familiar—how I don’t know. *Out Magazine* or *Genre* or *The Advocate* or something. He told me to go find Brian, who took a bump as well. I lost Brian for the longest time as the world melted into body parts and planes of sweat and sound.

And then everything hit me like a diesel truck. A flash and then dark and everything above is a brilliant green web of lasers bouncing off small mirrors—how are they doing this? I stop and just watch. The music is suddenly in me, it’s perfect, the flash of lights carried my mind back with it as it flashed over my head. There is a sheet of light above us bouncing into fans of lasers scattering in all directions. I keep hearing myself say fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck. THIS IS SO BEAUTIFUL AND I FEEL AMAZING.

Bob is helpful all night, asking if we’re okay, bringing us what seems like an endless supply of water. “Make sure you drink lots of water or you’ll get dehydrated from the e and all the dancing you’re doing.” Peter is attentive and friendly: “Isn’t the music just perfect? It’s just where you need it to be.” And then he’s kissing me; a rasp of his beard and a flash of mint from his gum. I can’t pull myself away and have no idea what to do. He stops and smiles bright eyes from under the brim of his dark blue baseball cap. “Honey you look great—isn’t this fun?” He has no idea. Kissing him opened up another world that spun away with the music. I didn’t know a body could sustain this much pleasure. My flesh threatened to come out of my skin. And then the smell hit me. Sweat, heavy and deep, rose up and swallowed me. I swallowed back and walked through a moving wall of heat. I wanted to eat these people or drink them, or be swallowed by them or something encompassing and intimate and total.

And then the universe flowers open and I am in Babylon crushed between Jaret’s broad back and Peter’s bull-like chest. Hands are on my arms and biceps. Someone—Peter?—comments on them, fuck he feels good, he’s

squeezing them quit tightly. I flex my arm—make the rest of my body hard for him and he runs his hands everywhere. I'm totally lost in the feeling of his body. The music moves in and out of trance—very loud—melodic and hypnotising. Jaret's and then Peter's bodies are like magnets—we collapse into each other's arms, small movements to the music, rubs on shoulders, temples, they both taste like meat. Salty hot perfect kisses and I don't know where I begin and they end. Kissing the two of them at the same time is like some sort of triangular merging, some sort of perfect point in the universe suspended in music. Then the energy changes with the music does something and something sets up in my chest and we split break out of the groove and smile. The dancing is perfect and the music and my arms are in the air and I can't stop moving or screaming and this will not end.

In the long blink of an eye, eternity passed and the music stopped with an imperceptible finality, a quiet landing. Bright white floodlights thudded on. It was a few moments after 6:00 AM. Half-dressed men stood blinking in the quiet, adjusting to the morning's intrusion. Some wandered gently around what was the dance floor, struggling into wet T-shirts. Others looked slowly and carefully for friends and lovers. My own shirt was wet and heavy with sweat, cold and clammy across my back. The room was filled with the quiet indignation of cat stretching awake—blinking and disturbed. I held Brian's hand and turned slowly looking. Brian asks a man beside us: "Had a good time?" He smiled, paused as he thought and replied, "You know what it was like? The best I could say was that it was like bliss." Peter and Jaret were a short distances away arm in arm, kissing and hugging farewells to friends. Brian turned to me, mostly joking, half-serious: "When we grow up can we be just like Jaret and Peter?" "Yes," I replied. A line up was forming at the coat check. The floor was a litter of empty water bottles and bits of paper. A dark T-shirt was curled into a mess at our feet. I remember feeling enormous gratitude—accompanied by exhaustion and a profound desire to be still. I smiled at Jaret, said "Thank you for an amazing night." I turned to Peter said thank you and gave him a quick awkward hug. "That was absolutely amazing. I've never seen or done anything like this. I didn't know you could have that much fun" Under the brim of his blue baseball cap, he grinned and replied: "Honey that's why you do this with friends." (Fieldnotes 1998)

### ***Writing the Body***

As much as the interpretive, rhetorical tone of my fieldnotes is tied to my desire to find and create meaning, it is also an effect of the nature of circuit-like events and the fact that this dissertation must necessarily be a project based on writing. The challenge of representing the circuit is complicated by two issues. First, like all social experiences, the circuit is not a static event or thing. Rather, it is about the shifting relations and meanings

that compose these events. Thus the points of analytical interest associated with the circuit experience—meanings and the social relations built around these meanings—are necessarily mobile and open to interpretation and change. Second, these meanings are grounded in and built around complex bodily experiences. Circuit and circuit-like events are, if anything, sensual—scopic, aural, tactile, olfactory—experiences that verge, in many cases, on the sublime. Understanding and capturing the ineffable through writing is, at best, a poor solution that requires continual editing and elaboration.

Ethnographic observations were recorded after the events. With smaller events and on those occasions where I attend without the use of drugs, the observations are generally recorded the next day. With larger events and on those occasions where I do choose to use drugs, observations are usually recorded a few days following. These initial recordings were generally short, in point form—the intent was to create chronological memory aids that could be later fleshed out. The major focus of my attention in the first phase of recordings was the experience of the event, how it felt, smelled, the feelings I encountered in others and myself—rather than what I might have thought. I tried to keep the focus close to the bone—about the body, feeling sensation, guts. After constructing what I understood as a skeleton for my own experiences, I frequently engaged my partner in his recollection, asking him how he understood any moments we shared as well as asking him to give me a sense of his night. In this engagement—usually over a very late lunch the next day—I let him do the talking, and occasionally offer him my recollections or thoughts as points of departure. The intent was to let him speak, rather than direct his attention to any issues that might be of interest to me. Brian's participation proved useful in that some of these events are very large—I invariably miss everything and he offers another set of eyes. As an aside, I note that I would not be the first ethnographer to take his or her significant other into the field and/or draw on the expertise of one's partner as an aspect of fieldwork (Gearing 1995).

Over the course of this research, I re-visited and wrote over or through my growing body of fieldnotes constantly. A first pass focused on recording and elaborating hand written memory aids. In the process of actually writing up fieldnotes, I did what I can to remain in the ethnographic present, conscious of tense and pronoun usage, and embarrassingly enough, re-invoke the experience by listening to extremely loud dance

music with the lights out. Later visitations involved further elaboration—adjectives and adverbs were tied up with an attempt to render the observations more lyrical, more evocative of what I experienced. The goal here was excess and refinement. This also involves a conscious effort on my part to sharpen the bodily nature of the experience, to evoke the guts of what I encountered. To keep the felt bodily experiences of the circuit at the forefront of my analysis, I draw on methodological tools set out by Ellis (1991a, 1991b). Ellis argues for “an emotional sociology that describes, embodies, and interprets lived emotional experience” facilitated by techniques of self-introspection and interactive introspection (Ellis 1991a: 123, see also Ronai 1992; Ronai and Ellis 1989; Ellis and Flaherty 1992). In self-introspection

the researcher makes a conscious effort to be aware of awareness (meta-awareness), to examine self and feelings, and to record systematically self-reflections and their apparent links to social situations and structural constraints. In interactive introspection, the researcher works back and forth with others to facilitate their self-introspection. The object of study is the emergent experiences of both parties. (Ellis 1991a: 129)

Tertiary visitations involve mundane chores like spell-checking and fixing sentence structure. At the same time, re-reading/re-writing brings with it ruminations that are farther removed—theoretical, methodological, and ethical issues emerge; categories and concepts begin to appear or fall apart.

The elaborated tone of my fieldnotes—what amounts to a reaction to the difficulty in writing and representing—stems from the fact that the circuit and bodily experience are tightly imbricated. The relationship between bodily experiences and social life has been addressed in medical sociology and anthropology, particularly in the analyses of disease and disease processes. While about illness, these ethnographic and narrative analyses are not so much focused on disease and disease processes as they are on what illness can tell us about the self, meaning, power, and change. Illness and other practices and experiences associated with the body are understood as idioms of social distress, as practices which speak to a subject’s social position and his or her capacity for agency in relation to this social position. In this light, the body and its experiences are seen as markers of a subject’s relationships to broader social structures and meaning systems. The body, imbued with social meaning, is historically situated and becomes not only a signifier of belonging and order, but also an active forum for the expression of

dissent. These dual modes of bodily expression—belonging and dissent—are conceptualised as culturally produced in a dialectical exchange with the externalised ongoing performance of social life (Lock 1993). While cautioning against reading all “illness episodes” as political positions, Lock (1993) notes that “ethnographic analysis and narrative accounts reveal an intimate relationship between illness and politics” (p. 144).

Clearly the circuit is about bodily experiences—pleasure in particular—and belonging. It is also about the body and dissent. In light of the centrality of bodily experience, the relationship between the body and meaning necessarily becomes a point of inquiry in a study of the circuit. As an object of inquiry, the body has only recently begun to receive analytical attention by sociologists, anthropologists, and ethnographers (Crossley 2001; Csordas 1994, 1999; Farnell 1999; Jackson 1989; Shilling 1993; Stoller 1989; Turner 1984; Williams and Bendelow 1998). In a review of the role of the body in anthropology, Csordas (1999) synthesises several ideas about how ethnographic practice and bodily practice might come together. He writes, “From an early anonymity as a taken-for-granted background feature of social life, [the body] emerged first as an explicit topic of anthropological research then as a problem as its cultural and historical instability as a natural object became increasingly evident. Later embodiment presented itself as an opportunity for reformulating previous interpretations and rethinking fundamental concepts of culture and self” (Csordas 1999: 187). The central issue Csordas (1999) documents is a shift from a focus on the body as sign to that of embodiment. We all have bodies, and taking the various “modulations” and “multiple modes” of embodiment seriously is critical for understanding how cultures work.

### **Taking Embodiment Seriously**

While taking embodiment seriously might mean any number of things, Csordas (1999) thinks about embodiment in light of the reflexive turn within ethnography. Csordas (1999) understands ethnographic reflexivity to be about situating the author and his or her relationship to the interlocutor within the acts of ethnographic practice, interrogating the relationship between representation and experience:

In this view of ethnography the proper referent of any account is not a represented “world”; now it is specific instances of discourse...It locates



cultural interpretations in many sorts of reciprocal contexts, and it obliges writers to find diverse ways of rendering negotiated realities as multisubjective, power-laden, and incongruent. In this view, 'culture' is always relational, an inscription of communicative processes that exist, historically *between* subjects in relations of power. (Clifford 1986: 15, emphasis in the original)

While the reflexive turn certainly complicates the relationship between language and experience and eliminates a dualism, Csordas (1999) argues that it “does so not by transcending the dualism but by reducing experience to language, or discourse, or representations....implying that to ask, ‘representation of what’ is fallaciously essentialist” (p. 183). Rather than rethinking the relationship between representation and experience, ethnographic reflexivity merely restructures the practices of representation.

Culture is not simply in our representations of objects but also “in” the modulations and multiple modes of embodied perception of these representations. In place of a reflexive practice, Csordas (1999) suggests that we take embodiment seriously by moving “forward under the sign of the *reflective*. Here, pre-reflective gut feelings and sensory engagement are raised to the level of methodological self-consciousness by insertion of a phenomenological sense of embodiment into the ethnographic enterprise” (Csordas 1999: 185). A more nuanced discussion of ethnographic representation needs to recognise that while discourse might indeed constitute experience—that is, we must remain reflexive—discourse also discloses its “embodied immediacy”. Perception is a “basic bodily experience, where the body is not an object but a subject, and where embodiment is the condition for us to have any object—that is to objectify reality—in the first place” (Csordas 1999: 183). While the body is both a source and a product of representations, it is also the existential ground of those representations: our perceptions are embodied. Embodiment is the “indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and [a] mode of presence and engagement in the world” and can be a valuable starting point for thinking about the self and culture (Csordas 1994: 12).

What I believe Csordas is advocating is an embodied ethnography rather than simply an ethnography of the body. What this means is that the body—or more precisely, bodily experience—might be more usefully understood as an avenue or approach rather than an object of analysis. “There is not a special kind of datum or a special method for eliciting such data but a methodological attitude that demands attention to bodiliness

even in purely verbal data such as written text or oral interview” (Csordas 1999: 184). To outline what this methodological attention to bodiliness entails and how this attitude might be executed, I turn again to my relationship to the circuit experience.

I have attended circuit events in Montreal, Vancouver, Toronto, and Orlando and attended circuit-like events in Vancouver, Seattle, New York, and Toronto. I have laughed with friends before, during, and after circuit parties, danced with anticipation at the thought of attending a circuit party and danced for hours once we arrived. I have spent four days in another city and seen nothing of it except my hotel room and a warehouse space. I have gone to the gym to lift weights with the express intent of getting a party pump. I have discussed the circuit over coffee and dinner, kvetched over the music, lights, sound, door policy, coatcheck line. With friends I have planned accommodations, travel arrangements, and ticket purchases. I have stood in front of the mirror and thought, “How can I possibly take my shirt off looking like this?” as well as, “Fuck I look good tonight”. I have inhaled one form of recreational drug, drank another, and washed down a third with a bottle of Evian in the course of one night. I have sat down with people who have ingested more drugs than was wise and cautioned others not to mix this with that. Like others, I have made the decision to abstain from drugs as well as the decision to take drugs. At the time of this writing, I am currently on the board of directors of a harm reduction initiative for gay men who attend circuit and circuit-like events and use recreational drugs. I have gone out of my way to find the right shirt, knowing that I will take it off ten minutes after getting to a party. I have helped organise circuit events and performed at circuit-like events. And I have spent days struggling with the fragile moods and emotional states that occasionally come with having to re-enter hum-drum everyday life after attending circuit parties. In short I am, as much as anyone else, a circuit boy who is also doing research on the circuit experience.

Given this, obvious questions emerge. What are the implications of doing research on something in which I am—in constantly changing degrees and by no means positively—invested? What are the implications of doing research on something of which I am a member? What are the logical or necessary consequences an insider position has on the research process, on how the researcher knows an object? To chart the logical implications or consequences of my insider position raises questions about

how I conceptualise my objects. To be an insider turns the analytical lens from the other toward the self and the interactions between self and other. Here it is possible to engage in a very participatory mode of analysis and description that operates in the social tissues between the subject and object. Thus, one implication emerging from insider ethnography is its challenge to the distinction between subject and object, highlighting the positioned, relative, and interactional nature of ethnographic knowledge claims (Narayan 1993, Kondo 1986). A second implication insider research has for social research more generally is the possibility of writing against cultural categories. (Abu-Lughod 1991, 1993). To be inside categories is to know that they do not necessarily fit. Taken together, these implications suggest that insider research requires an analysis that challenges the subject/object dichotomy.

To be an insider and to do insider research is to be part of the object of inquiry. It means being positioned in a particular way, it means offering up an understanding of the world as my world and being unable to speak about this world in generalities. To be an insider means that I am engaged in this world; I am neither subject/self nor object/other. To think about the implications of this position, I introduce what Jackson (1983a, 1983b, 1989) calls radical empiricism and what Stoller (1989, 1997) calls sensuous scholarship. Both Jackson (1989) and Stoller (1989, 1997) argue for a mode of ethnographic inquiry that resists traditional empiricism and ethnographic realism. Traditional empiricism makes a clear distinction between the knowing subject and the known object, while ethnographic realism attempts to render the known object in abstracted, generalised, and totalised terms (Van Mannen 1992). As an insider I am able to know my world only through particularities.

Overall, modes and metaphors of analysis based on vision create distance between the subject and object, encouraging a spatialised relationship, where the known object is understood to exist “over there” and the knowing subject is understood to be “here”. At least two particular problems follow from this. On the one hand, analysis grounded in an intellectualised pursuit of knowledge, is often, according to Narayan (1993) “dense with theoretical analysis” and for Stoller filled with “dry analytical prose.” As a result, traditional empiricism risks insulating social research from all but those who are able to understand esoteric academic arcana—where social researchers are able to

speak only to each other. This amounts to research that has no resonance with the subject, where the work “speaks at” rather than “speaks to” the subject. More likely than not, the subject becomes something analysts speak about. On the other hand, the conventions of traditional empiricism and ethnographic realism resist, distort, or even erase the complexity, inconsistency, and incoherence from everyday experience. Thus, the effect of this visual bias in traditional empiricism and ethnographic realism is an isolation of the viewer from the world—a denial of coevalness with the subject—and the abstraction of thought and categories of understanding from lived social context. Objects are separated from subjects and rendered intelligible through abstracted frameworks that constrain and erase complexity.

Jackson and Stoller work to resist a distanced visualist approach to knowing, beginning with the idea that knowledge emerges from participation in and with the lived world rather than from academic analysis. Calling for a meaningful participatory engagement on the part of the ethnographer, Jackson (1989) writes, “Eschewing the supervisory perspective of traditional empiricism, the radical empiricist tries to avoid fixed viewpoints by dispersing authorship, working through all five senses, and reflecting inwardly as well as observing outwardly” (p. 8). In a similar vein, Stoller calls for sensuous or tasteful scholarship. “Writers of tasteful ethnographies mix an assortment of ingredients—dialogue, description, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, irony, smells, sights, and sounds—to create a narrative that savours the world of the Others” (p. 32). By attending to sight, smell, sound, to a non-abstracted experience of a setting or position, Jackson and Stoller advocate a methodological strategy that urges the researcher to engage events and others in ways that move him or her beyond merely seeing.

As a researcher and as a participant, I cannot engage in research about the circuit experience with an attitude that treats the other-as-object. Conversations (of any kind) are possible only when others are understood as interactional partners, not as things to be known. I cannot engage with these men, with these social relations, with these events without giving myself up to them, without humbling myself to their lives and experiences. To do otherwise would place me in a disrespectful position of distance, where conversation is not possible. At best, I might be able to yell my point across.

Moreover, to render these experiences in terms of abstracted categories is an exercise in arrogance:

I'm drawn to thinking about the conversation I had with Brian sometime after an event. The thought of glitter was on my mind. The previous night was fun, and what keeps coming to mind was some guy's incredible chest—smooth, pecs that just hung off him like this cliff, chiselled. Great nipples that sort of slanted down a bit. His chest was covered in glitter, silver or translucent, very pretty; every time he moved or laughed or reached out, he would shine and sparkle. Delightful. I find myself puzzled at the mixture of a muscled body—a manly man—and shiny sparkly glitter. I ask Brian about this, thinking about Butler's (1990) idea of drag and parody. "The performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed...As much as drag creates a unified picture of 'woman', it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence" (Butler 1990: 137). "Just as bodily surfaces are enacted as the natural, so these surfaces can become the site of a dissonant and denaturalised performance that reveals the performative status of the natural itself" (Butler 1990: 146). So, I wonder if glitter on boys might be drag-like. I make the suggestion that while the circuit space is about a particular sense of masculinity, it's one that is underwritten—challenged, parodied—by the pretty things we do to ourselves in those spaces—glitter, little toys that are hardly manly things. He mostly guffaws, saying it does nothing but confirm that we are a bunch of girls. For him, glitter affirms the image of an effeminised sensibility—there's nothing being subverted here. I press the issue trying to explain my point to him—I keep thinking that he doesn't understand me, that maybe I'm doing a bad job of parsing Butler, or that he's being stubborn or not getting it or something. And he's adamant. Glitter ain't any sort of subversion or parody. It's effeminising and actually reaffirms that we're all a bunch of girls. The heterosexual economy of desire doesn't fall apart in the face of fun or irony or parody—it congeals. I go over the same argument for fifteen minutes, explaining what parody or drag or variations on it mean for this thing called the heterosexual economy of desire. We're both a bit tense. And then I realise I'm not talking to him, I'm not listening to him; I'm talking at him, I'm telling him, as if he doesn't understand what he's experienced. I'm trying to wrap these ideas of parody and subversion around his ideas and they just don't fit. It's not that he's not listening to me, it's that I'm not listening to him. (Fieldnotes 1999)

Relying on the authority of conceptual categories and their abstracted relationships creates strains with conversational others—in effect, becoming a hindrance. That these categories are limits to understanding becomes most clear where experience begins to escape language, where the moment becomes ineffable:

He folds himself into my arms, head on my shoulder; he's curled his hands in front of him, resting them on my chest, he's still. The music is great, but he's quiet. Suddenly I feel like a father; he's crying on my neck in the middle of 18,000 shirtless men and laser shows and music. I'm covered in the sexy smell of sweat and tears. I'm not alarmed and somehow know what's going on. I ask anyway, to let him know I know. He half chokes, mostly smiles: "I'm so happy I could cry." (Fieldnotes 1999)

Another kind of knowing is at work here, one that falls beneath the radar of conceptual or linguistic handling. No amount of abstracted thinking or intellectualised interrogation could account for these tears. It is in these contexts that a participatory, sensual or radical empiricism becomes imperative. "Once the anthropological writer has experienced 'the inside' or 'the place where logic bites its own tail,' the discourse of ethnographic realism is no longer completely adequate" (Stoller 1989: 54).

To evoke the ineffable, the illogical, the unspeakable, Stoller (1989) argues for a mode of analysis "in which the event becomes the author of the text and the writer becomes the interpreter of the event who serves as an intermediary between the event (author) and the readers" (p. 54). In this process the knowing subject and known object are pulled together such that the subject is compelled to participate with the object. Thus, a participatory engagement becomes possible only through an engaged and honest participation, where the tight imbrication of self, other, event, and place is not erased through conceptual mishandling (Kondo 1990; Stoller 1989). Significantly, this mode of analysis calls for a sensual, bodily engagement, requiring the researcher to "adopt a methodological strategy of joining in without ulterior motive and literally putting oneself in the place of other persons: inhabiting their world. Participation becomes an end in itself rather than a means of gathering closely observed data which will be subject to interpretation elsewhere after the event (Jackson 1989: 135). To participate as an "end in itself" is to understand in a way that differs dramatically from the "visualist ideology of referential discourse" (Tyler 1986: 130, see also Jackson 1989: 119-138). It is to grasp the sense of the world, a sense that is stymied by categories; it is to understand tears without knowing.

Given that my research site is about the ineffable, as well as the social interactions and participation that make the ineffable possible and understandable, I am unable to imagine knowing this world through only my mind or eyes. To understand this

experience is to necessarily participate through a bodily engagement, an engagement whose nature is captured through sensuous tasty scholarship—modes of analysis that evoke engagement rather than explain: narration, lyricism, poetry, lush readings and writings:

The whole point of ‘evoking’ rather than ‘representing’ is that it frees ethnography from mimesis and the inappropriate mode of scientific rhetoric that entails ‘objects,’ ‘facts,’ ‘descriptions,’ ‘inductions,’ ‘generalisations,’ ‘verification,’ ‘experiment,’ ‘truth,’ and like concepts that, except as empty invocations, have no parallels either in the experience of ethnographic field work or in the writing of ethnographies. (Tyler 1986: 130)

Thus, a statement like “all you have to do is let go, enjoy it all” is about more than trying to tell an outsider that “you had to be there.” It is also to say that understanding requires participation, being open to learning a bodily language where knowing comes through the flesh. “For ethnographers embodiment is more than the realisation that our bodily experience gives metaphorical meaning to our experience; it is rather the realisation that...we too are consumed by the sensual world, that ethnographic things capture us through our bodies” (Stoller 1997: 23).

My bias, if not already apparent, should be brought to the fore. I am interested in lived (bodily) experience and what lived (bodily) experience can tell us about how we live the world and how we think about that lived world. Through ethnographic practice informed by lived experience, I try to give the circuit, as an “actually” lived experience, pride of place and use it to engage and complicate social scientific practice. Thus, I am interested in engaging social science from a particular direction—asking how lived bodily experience might be studied such that its contingencies come to inform how we do social scientific inquiry. Here, attention to lived bodily experience brings with it a mode of analysis that is, I believe, both attentive to lived bodily experience but also necessarily embodied in light of this attention. Clearly at the centre of my ethnographic and methodological considerations is an interest in the nature and effect of lived bodily experience on how and what we know.

## Conclusion

It is for this reason that I include, with much trepidation what I take to be candid assessments and accounts of my own practices—particularly around sexual practices and drug use. As a gay man, I am insider to the circuit; I attended parties long before deciding to study them and have, on more than one occasion, picked up tricks at them, spent more than a few hours exploring the contours of another man’s body on the dance floor, and have even slept with one man who I later asked for—and received—an interview. Moreover, I have chosen to consume one form of recreational drug or another throughout my engagement with the circuit—although certainly not with every, or even with most, of the parties I have attended. Importantly these engagements have become data—either directly as fieldnotes or indirectly as what Roger Sanjek (1990) calls headnotes. Substantively, this engagement has been enormously productive; beyond the personal growth such interaction has afforded me, doing so also allowed me to develop critical insight into the relationships between the circuit, gay men’s communities, gendered identity, and health. Indeed many of these insights may not have emerged otherwise. I understand that this will, in all likelihood, be regarded by some as scandalous and raise concerns about validity—or worse “objectivity”—and the problem of ethics in research. In closing this chapter, I would like to reflect on—and perhaps, deflect—these concerns

At one level, I am willing to accept the argument that the prospect of sex and inebriation in the field—separately or in conjunction—are cause for concern. I am not, however, willing to accept any blanket assessment or categorical rejection of these kinds of bodily involvement in the field and in fieldwork. In terms of sexual practice, I would argue that any blanket condemnation needs to consider its own conditions of possibility and that, in particular, it be recognised that Judeo-Christian morality is a significant aspect of our cautionary focus on sex, suggesting perhaps that the concern is less about research than it is about control. If we are to believe Foucault (1979), problematizing is part and parcel of a set of power relations that produce and regulate the subject in the name of some higher purpose. As it cordons off sex as being more important than any other aspect of our lives, any condemnation rearticulates an already present “apparatus of sexuality”. It also functions to barricade sex behind a rather familiar wall of sex phobia.



Identifying sexuality as a—indeed the—major site of ethical quandary risks situating erotic subjectivity beyond the bounds of inquiry. There are significant implications emerging from this for the production of knowledge. In particular, hobbling inquiry about erotic subjectivity silences gay and lesbian ethnographers and threatens to silence gay and lesbian identities/communities. Sex and sexuality are of *critical* importance for gays and lesbians and it is fundamentally impossible to think about gay and lesbian communities/identities without considering sex and sexuality as central axes of experience.

Any simple problematizing of sex is also part of social science's obsession with objectivity, an obsession that compels disengagement on the part of the researcher. At one level or another, this problematization assumes desire functions to confound what we know—our passions get in the way and render our assessments suspect. A necessary correction is disengagement on the part of the researcher, a stance that is part of a broader set of binaries that pit the mind against the body, the intellect against desire. As feminist thinkers have aptly illustrated, these binaries are not *merely* binaries. The mind/body split is also a hierarchy, privileging the intellect over desire—a privilege mapped over the distinctions we make between men and women. Thus, while a blanket condemnation of sex in the field threatens to silence gay and lesbian voices, it is also part of a broader cultural mechanism relegating women to a secondary position.

While I do not regard this—and I must admit, small—aspect of my research practice as scandalous, I do regard it as dangerous. As a new sociologist with very little by way of institutional protection, I am conscious of other's tales about myopic assessments of the value, place, and worth of "sex in the field" (Wolcott 2002). I am, however, heartened by the recent spate of scholarship on the topic of sex and sexuality in the field which has begun to outline the ways sexual practice—configured broadly—in the field has much to tell us about how we engage in research (Frank 1998; Kulick and Willson 1995; Lewin and Leap 1996; Markowitz and Ashkenazi 1999). I see my research practice—in particular, the engagement made possible through the body and bodily experience—as part of this contribution.

I regard the prospect of conducting research while inebriated—or drawing on such experiences for the purposes of creating data—as a practice that is, and likely will

always be, fraught with danger. The use of mind altering substances creates not only danger to the self and, to a lesser extent, others, but also, in the context of this project danger to the practice of social science. In short, the prospect of being high places the self, others, and the discipline at risk of harm as well as bringing the validity of any assessment into doubt. While I accept that risk and validity are real issues that emerge, I am unwilling to accept any blanket condemnation of this sort of engagement. As with the prospect of sex, the circuit is, in many ways, about drug use and it is difficult for me to understand how drug-use could be any more or any less problematic or risky than becoming involved in religious practice, kinship relations, or community and political decisions—or any number of the other social relations in which a researcher might become embroiled in his or her ethnographic practice. More over, to argue that the use of drugs invalidates findings or interpretations would necessarily make any interpretation of the circuit based on attendees voices impossible—the bulk of attendees reflect on experiences in which they were under the influence of drugs.

The key, I believe, is to understand and use aspects of the field experience in a productive way, as a means of speaking to how we know and how we construct knowledge of the world around us. Categorical imperatives do little for advancing how we think or contribute to what we know. In light of this, I close this chapter with a fieldnote excerpt that I believe helps flesh out the connection between bodily experiences and knowing:

Somewhere along the line Drew took a bump of k and started to talk about a trip he was on, using the language of going some place. You know me though—sceptical about it all. I just said “go with it and stay there”. I didn’t want him to ruin his high, but thought “whatever”. He went on about this a couple of times—saying he was “somewhere else”. He needed to be held for a bit—so I did. Wanted to make sure he felt safe and good about the whole thing. I wasn’t worried about a bad trip or anything, just wanted to contribute to a good time. And then he said he was “parachuting” back—and I could imagine the experience—where things become clear quickly and the whole experience of the music and boys and the dancing feels cool and crisp.

And then I took a bump—probably about 4:00 AM or so—and I have to admit, it was a trip—and this really surprised me in a way that was new. This is tied into the way in which I feel or rather fear a loss of control—my bubble of worry as Drew said. Part of me struggles with the idea that these are “just” drug induced experiences and for that reason are not real.

How long have I been harbouring that idea? Drug induced or not, these are real moments. They are trips to other places where things occur, where life happens—where people *become*. I need to accept that these experiences are a “reality”—they are real and lived and true—the same way that I look at the sky and see blue or look at the grass and see green. Drugs or no, they are real experiences. Of course I was thinking, “Fuck I’m high” and made mention of it to Vaughn. “It’s okay, I’m really high too”—it was reassuring. Drew made the same response as well—or at least a similar one—which in the end reassured me too. And a bit later Alex showed up with his new boy, Patrick. I gave them both a kiss and said to Alex “Baby I’m a mess.” His response was quick “That’s okay,” and he gave me another hug. I wonder if that’s what I needed?

In any event, sceptical as I am, I did go somewhere, in a way that I don’t think I have before. I was a bit fearful, but I managed to talk my way through that—noting to myself that Drew was nearby and that I was fine. I remember looking for him every now and then, just to be sure. I was okay, for what seems to be the first time when it comes to k, and I think this was about the reassurance I felt. I asked Drew if I was a bit messy, and he said I wasn’t—so I started to trust myself and the experience—and then I really let go. Enjoyed the trip: a performer dropped from the ceiling from a huge silver ring, doing circus tricks and flips. The music and lights went all dark and were splashed with a beautiful mess of colours. I let things happen, let go, had fun in a way that I seldom do—danced, as somebody later mentioned “with people you wouldn’t normally dance with”.

Okay, a lesson learned through participating a bodily way—I have been struggling with this sort of embodied approach to this project and have known that I’m intellectualizing these experiences—or at least part of them. Embodied engagement is still hard to do and see—but it seems more generally that these lessons are lessons of truth. Trite, but Jackson (1989) and Stoller (1989, 1997) have got it right. And I keep forgetting this—or running from it out of fear that I’ll be lambasted during my defence. And that I’m missing something here is apparent for those around me—they keep telling me I don’t “let go” in different ways at different times. Intuitively they know I’m somehow disconnected from it all at times. They must—why else would they say this? It has less to do with any command to “relax” than it does with the command—or is it a request?—on their part to “engage with us.” Despite the fact that I’m an insider, there are outsider things that impinge upon my capacity to be/do/know as an insider (i.e.: my academic training with its emphasis on calmness and rationality and distance; a desire to see everything, as much as possible; a desire to create a picture; a desire to be objective or valid or something—some positivist pipe dream). My logic frequently runs along the lines of “I can’t be too out of control because I need to be able to remember this stuff or I need to function the next morning to write this stuff down.” These are all ways that the outside (there’s that word again)

world comes inside (that word again) to limit what might be known. These are ways that an outside/intellectualised/visualised way of knowing limits the contours of what could be known. I mean, how do you create a picture from a set of experiences that are so overwhelmingly about the body and bodily sensations? (Fieldnotes 2001)

Without fear of too much overstatement: the effect of a blanket of specific guidelines concerning sexual relations or the prospect of getting drunk with the locals in the field is chilling. The intensity of the bodily experience within the circuit would be inaccessible—and any analysis or interpretation would be constrained to the views of “outsiders” and conceptual mishandling. One might just as easily argue that such an account would itself be invalid—certainly biased—and, in many senses, mostly likely be inaccurate. This is *not* to suggest that we should be having sex in the field or getting high at every opportunity. It to suggest that we think carefully about the implications of any ethical fiat about sexual subjectivity and other ribald bodily practices in the field, bearing in mind that for some researchers and communities sex, sexuality, and drug use are overdetermining aspects of experience and without critical recognition of this fact, much stands to be silenced. Suffice to say that any categorical rejection (or acceptance) of the bodily practices of this ethnographer in his engagement with the circuit would say more about the critics rather than the problems of ethnographic validity, responsibility, or ethical practice.

# *Theoretical Interlude 1*

## *The Performative Thesis, Practice, and Identification*

### **Introduction**

Given that the circuit seems to be “about” identity, community, and bodily experiences, Butler’s (1990) poststructural queer account of subjectivity—with its emphasis on inclusion/exclusion—appears useful. In the following discussion, I introduce Butler’s poststructural account of identity, practice and change—as perhaps the exemplar of the linguistic turn. After outlining the contours of her performative thesis, I bring the circuit experience to bear upon this idea as a means of troubling the logic and explanation she proposes. The intention is not to disprove or reject Butler’s analysis—the intent is merely to trouble the ideas she proposes, to suggest there is something the linguistic turn might learn from the circuit experience.

Overall, Butler offers a radical social constructionist account of identity, where the sexual self—the nature of our sex, gender, and desire—is understood as an effect of discursive and linguistic practices (Butler 1990, 1991, 1993, 1995, 1997, 1999). Most accounts of gender think about gender through what Lloyd (1999) calls spatial and substantialist conceptions of identity. We regularly think of sexual subjectivity in ways that demarcate or spatially separate men from women. While there might exist cultural or

historical differences in the content of the terms “man” and “woman”, subjects are either masculine or feminine and rarely, if ever, do these two dimensions of self co-exist in the same space. Unlike substantialist frameworks which suggest that a coherent sexual and gendered identity is an effect of either the expression of internal (misaligned) biological imperatives or internalised social forces, Butler argues that identity is not a thing, but rather a doing. In her terms, identity is performative—an effect of the subject’s compulsion to perform, or refusing to perform, the discursive norms and ideals associated with the terms male and female, masculine and feminine, gay and straight. Thus identity is not a thing that exists—it is a practice or a doing, a verb that must be done:

Significantly, the performative effects of discourse do not require the intention of a speaker to do their constitutive magic. The force or effectivity of a performative will be derived from its capacity to draw on and reencode the historicity of those conventions in the present act...[it] is an effect of historically sedimented linguistic conventions...In other words, when words engage actions or constitute themselves a kind of action, they do this not because they reflect the power of an individual’s will or intention, but because they draw upon and reengage conventions which have gained their power precisely through a *sedimented iterability*. (Butler 1995: 134, emphasis in the original)

We do not name or decide the gender ideals we practice as our identities. Performative statements are statements which bring into being that which is named through the process of naming and are thus constitutive of that which they purport to describe. To argue that identity is performative is to suggest that discourse about identity produces the phenomenon—particular configurations of sex, gender, and desire—that it names.

What colours Butler’s poststructural account of identity in terms of queer theory is the way in which the practices and effects of heterosexism are central to her analysis. Sexual subjectivity is not simply a function of a subject’s enforced reiteration and embodiment of the discursive practices associated with sexuality. Rather, these discursive practices are always already heterosexist—what she terms the heterosexual economy of desire, the regulated and regulating assumptions that sex, gender, and (object of) desire are normally or naturally arranged along heterosexual lines. “Gender norms operate by requiring the embodiment of certain ideals of femininity and masculinity that are almost always related to the idealisation of the heterosexual bond” (Butler 1993:

231). It is widely assumed—but seldom clearly articulated—that there are two kinds of people in the world: males, who are masculine, and females, who are feminine; and both are necessarily or normally attracted to each other. The imperative of the heterosexual economy of desire allows for the production and regulation of certain ways of configuring sex, gender, and desire and excludes others:

This exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet ‘subject,’ but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject. The abject designates here precisely those ‘unliveable’ and ‘uninhabitable’ zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the ‘unliveable’ is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. (Butler 1993: 3)

Identity and sense of self are effects of an interplay of identification with the norms of the heterosexual economy of desire, which involves a repudiation of the constitutive outside. For Butler, there is no ontological space beyond the norms and discursive practice of the heterosexual economy of desire. Subjects, whether they are gay or straight, female or male, exist as effects of the discursive practices of this economy of desire. What we understand as our sex, our gender, and our sexuality are effects of a series of discursively based practices which we are compelled to negotiate and embody by virtue of the ever present nature of these discursive norms. Those whose sex, gender, or (object of) desire is not congruent with this economy are defined as sick, unnatural, abnormal, or otherwise incorrect—which is also to say that they do not register as complete subjects.

Butler’s performative account of identity hinges on two related assumptions regarding the nature of language. On the one hand, Butler assumes that language is not a referential practice but a constituting practice: language and speech “introduce a reality rather than report on an existing one” (Butler 1997: 33). On the other hand, she assumes that the connection between language and its effects is indeterminate. Speech acts do not necessarily have an effect as a naming strategy, which is to say that there is a gap between speech and the effect of speech. Naming is a practice which “regularly misses its mark” (Butler 1997: 33). As a consequence, the effect of speech introducing a particular reality requires continual effort—it requires force, a history of effect, “through

a citation of existing [historical] convention” or a “recognition of an authority” (Butler 1997: 33). Thus, the link between speech and language and event or thing is precarious—it is not necessary, but contingent—and requires repetition in order to be successful. Thus naming is an act of power, not description.

In light of this conceptualisation of the relation between language and reality, the constituting effect of gender ideals is always incomplete and must be repeated or reinforced time and time again. Gender identity—if it is to remain, say, masculine in its form—must by definition, remain coherent—that is, not feminine. “To the extent that gender is an assignment, it is an assignment which is never quite carried out according to [an] expectation, whose addressee never quite inhabits the ideal s/he is compelled to approximate” (Butler 1993: 22). This oppositional structure is maintained through processes of exclusion, where self and community are understood and bounded in relation to what one is not. At any point where this approximation is not maintained, the subject fails to adequately embody the norms of the heterosexual economy of desire and no longer possesses a subjectivity—he or she becomes incoherent and unknowable. For Butler, identities that fail to adequately embody the norms of the heterosexual economy of desire or do not negotiate its norms effectively are rendered unintelligible and met with either exclusion or violence.

In many respects, Butler’s performative thesis seems well suited as a means to think about the circuit experience. The way in which Butler brings to the foreground the body as a site on or through which a larger heteronormative order is inscribed resonates strongly with the centrality of the body in the circuit experience as well as the normative notions of identities that hold sway in the circuit. Even a casual assessment of the circuit would suggest that the circuit is clearly about a kind of performance and production of gendered identity. Indeed, the intersection of normative notions of what it means to be a man and the intense bodily experience of the circuit might suggest that the circuit is an ideal site to think about the intersection between identity, the body, and practice.

## **The Trouble with Gender Trouble**

There are, however, two conceptual puzzles or bugs that Butler does not adequately address. On the one hand, her symbolic account of power glosses over the social contexts, structures, and social relations through which subjects are compelled to



reiterate the discursive practices of the heterosexual economy of desire. On the other hand, her notion of agency—while novel and progressive—is somewhat constrained. Below, I detail both these conceptual problems and outline their origins.

### *Social Structure*

The queer project's aim to reveal the role heteronormative identity categories play in reproducing the status quo is powerful and persuasive. Seidman (1997) writes, "Yet queer theorists have often surrendered to a narrow culturalism or textualism; they have not articulated their critique of knowledge with a critique of the social conditions productive of such textual figures; they have not provided an account of the social conditions of their own critique" (p. 160). Elsewhere he argues, "Queer theory has largely abandoned institutional analysis...cultural meanings are never linked to social structural arrangements or processes such as nationalism, colonialism, globalisation, or dynamics of class or family formation or popular social movements" (Seidman 1997: 156). Stein and Plummer (1996) similarly state:

Queer theorists have attuned us to the importance of looking at texts, but as sociologists we need to look at how identities are constituted in the cultural practices of everyday life, though mediated by texts...what is required is a new paradigm for conceptualising 'identity-in-culture' developing an understanding of how sexuality, along with gender, race, ethnicity, class, and generation, is articulated and experienced within a terrain of social practices. (P: 138)

Adam (1998) also argues that the heterosexual/homosexual binary needs more than a textual analysis.

Understanding homophobia and its remedies requires examination of the structural and socio-historical processes that reproduce heterosexist projects. Social theory needs to identify not only how discourse produces subjectivity but how already constituted actors deploy discourse. (Adam 1998: 401)

Edwards' (1998) remarks run along the same lines when he critiques Butler's theorising. He writes:

Despite Butler's hint at social and structural mechanisms as 'punishment', the thrust of her analysis is that gender primarily exists at the level of discourse therefore tending to discount its significance as an institutionalised social practice. This typically poststructural perspective, while importantly documenting the power relations of discourse, misses

an analysis of power as an institutionally coercive, politically sanctioned and socially practised series of mechanisms of oppression. (Edwards 1998: 477)

The challenge queer theory faces is the linking of “cultural meanings” with “social structural arrangements or processes” in such a way as to make the exploration of “identity-in-culture” possible.

Indeed, in developing the idea of the heterosexual economy of desire, Butler (1990) herself highlights representational dimensions of the heterosexual imperative. Buried in a footnote, she writes:

I am drawing from Monique Wittig’s notion of the ‘heterosexual contract’ and, to a lesser extent, on Adrienne Rich’s notion of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ to characterise a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality (Butler 1990: 151).

The central problem here—for Butler and poststructural queer thought more generally—is a weak consideration of the social relations and conditions in and through which discursive practices do their constitutive magic. Butler’s symbolic notion of power effectively glosses over a crucial dimension of power: it is embedded in the way we live through and in social and political practices. Thus, while much of the circuit experience is tied into a necessity to remain intelligible, this intelligibility is also clearly linked to economic and class position, which offer the resources needed to afford tickets, accommodations, travel expenses, time away from work, time at a gym, supplements, and all the necessary details that enter into intelligible style.

To be intelligible is to be able and willing to pick up and speak through the practices of the heterosexual economy of desire. This involves a willingness to accept certain bodily configurations and ways of being on the dance floor—a capacity that hinges on one’s ability and desire to embody certain bodily configurations:

I just finished talking to Eric on the phone, asking if he would mind me using some of the things he said earlier for research purposes. We talked for a bit; he was telling me about his preparation for this upcoming event. He’ll be there for the Friday and Saturday. He was worried about his accommodations because an error was made and the hotel ended up booking him on the wrong days. He decided that “to make sure everything

was perfect” he would just stay a couple of extra days. “So this weekend is going to cost me \$1,200.00 just for hotel. Not to mention the four pairs of camouflage cargo pants I just went out and bought, one for the Friday afternoon party, one for the Friday night party, one for the Saturday afternoon party, and one for the last party on Sunday night, which just cost me 300.00 right there.” I laughed and said he would blend right in. He was excited, for sure—said he had just ended up finishing a cycle of andro-something or other which I think is a precursor to testosterone, a weight supplement of some kind, and a cycle of steroids. “I’ve put on 8 pounds.” He said they were from the States, that it wasn’t available in Canada. So I can’t imagine the cost. (Fieldnotes 1999)

Eric is a good looking, big man and is certainly cognisant of how the symbolic power associated with his body’s shape ensures or allows for his intelligibility within the circuit experience.

Yet, his capacity to reiterate the symbolic power associated with normative gender ideals—through the literal embodiment of these ideals as muscle that attends his use of weight supplements and steroids—is contingent upon his social position. As a single man with a graduate degree, working in a major financial institution, Eric lives his life—including the reiteration of gender ideals—through a set of social and political structures that allows him to do the circuit in a way that supports any efforts he might make. He is capable of signifying in particular ways that are effective, in no small part due to his position in a larger economic world. In short, Eric is embedded in particular social and political relations that help entrench his reiteration of gender ideals in a way that ensures cultural intelligibility. Butler’s symbolic interpretation of power does not readily address the conditions that make this kind of signification more or less possible. “This is not to deny the force of Butler’s notion of the performative, but it does suggest that an analysis of the transformatory effects of resignification upon entrenched norms requires a contextualisation within wider socio-economic relations and an understanding of agency not just as a structural potential [of language and symbolic processes] but as a set of embedded practices” (McNay 1999: 183).

### ***On the Question of Change, Practice, and Resignification***

A related set of difficulties emerges when we consider the nature of change and practice permitted by Butler’s analysis. Because linguistic naming is arbitrary—requiring repetition in order to take effect—it is always, to some extent out of control. “A space is

thereby opened for an alternative conception of agency in terms of a counter-discourse that acknowledges its emergence from and dependency upon [linguistic/discursive] structures of constraint” (McNay 1999: 178). Identity is not a thing or a state, but a process or a continual doing of gender, a doing that must be continually reiterated. It is for this reason that novel practices or change are to be found within the possibility of making changes or variations to the always already present heterosexual economy of desire through what Butler and others refer to as practices of “resignification”.

To be constituted by language is to be produced within a given network of power/discourse which is open to resignification, redeployment, subversive citation from within, and interruption and inadvertent convergences with other networks. “Agency” is to be found precisely at such junctures where discourse is renewed... That the subject is that which must be constituted again and again implies that it is open to formations that are not fully constrained in advance... if the subject is a reworking of the very discursive processes by which it is worked, then agency is to be found in the possibilities of resignification opened up by discourse. (Butler 1995: 135)

The continual doing or repetition of gendered norms “is thus a function of their inefficacy, and so the question of subversion, of working the weakness in the norm, becomes a matter of inhabiting the practices of its rearticulation” (Butler 1993: 237). Butler is clear that it is not the subject who intends to inhabit the practices of rearticulation. There is no intentional “doer” behind resignification. This is not, according to Butler, the same as removing the intentional subject entirely—it is merely to point out that the intentional subject is an effect of discursive practice and is unthinkable before discourse or its practice.

The processes of resignifying practices open the possibility of change by exposing the regulatory fictions of the heterosexual economy of desire—that is, resignifying practices open or create space for subversion:

The construction of coherence conceals the gender discontinuities that run rampant within heterosexual, bisexual, and gay and lesbian contexts in which gender does not necessarily follow from sex, and desire, or sexuality generally, does not seem to follow from gender—indeed, where none of these dimensions of significant corporeality express or reflect one another. When the disorganisation and desegregation of the field of bodies disrupt the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence, it seems that the expressive model loses its descriptive force. That regulatory idea is then

exposed as a norm and a fiction that disguises itself as a developmental law regulating the sexual field that it purports to describe. (Butler 1990: 135)

Once it is recognised or experienced that the regulatory ideals are not necessary—that there can be variations to their structure—it becomes possible to understand those ideals as just that—ideals. The question necessarily becomes: What does this resignification look like? What “kind of gender performance will enact and reveal the performativity of gender itself in a way that destabilises the naturalised categories of identity and desire?” (Butler 1990: 139). “What constitutes a subversive repetition within signifying practices of gender?” (Butler 1990: 146).

Most generally, subversive repetition and the exposure of the regulatory ideals as a fiction involve practices where symbols and signifiers already present within the normative heterosexual economy of desire are combined in contradictory and novel ways. Butler uses the parody of drag as an example of subversive repetitions capable of revealing the fraudulent connections between sex, gender, and desire. The drag queen is one who demonstrates that the norms of the heterosexual economy of desire do not fully legislate or contain their own heterosexually organised ideals (Butler 1990, 1991, 1993). “The replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original” (Butler 1990: 31). Drag is a practice which parodies the idea of an original gender identity, revealing the failure of the performative to successfully impose or legislate itself:

The performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed...As much as drag creates a unified picture of ‘woman’, it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalised as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. (Butler 1990: 137)

Butch-femme relationships are also sites through which the connections stabilising the heterosexual economy of desire collapse. Butch women, desiring other women, appear in masculine forms, while femme women, desiring other women, appear as women. Butler takes pains to clarify that the “identification” of masculinity within a lesbian sexual identity is not an internalisation of heterosexuality. A lesbian who adopts a masculine trope reconfigures masculinity in terms that are clearly homosexual, and

specifically lesbian. What becomes visible through parody is the contingent arrangement of sex, gender, and desire. As parody reveals there is no necessary connection between sex, gender, and desire, it opens up the possibility of excess and hyperbole. The many permutations of sex, gender, and desire—permutations that would be impossible if gender were not arbitrary and performative—suggest that it is impossible for the heterosexual economy of desire, as an effect of power, to impose itself once and for all.

Butler has, however, made cautionary notes about the politics of drag, pointing out that there is nothing necessarily subversive about drag: “drag is not unproblematically subversive...there is no guarantee that exposing the naturalised status of heterosexuality will lead to its subversion. Heterosexuality can augment its hegemony through its denaturalisation, as when we see denaturalising parodies that reidealise the heterosexual norms without calling them into question” (Butler 1993: 231). Despite this caution, however, the idea and practice of parody is, I suggest, more than an example of resignification. Gender parody, “the transferability” of gender ideals or norms is resignification (which may or may not be subversive). The “transferability of a gender ideal or gender norm calls into question the abjecting power that it sustains...an occupation or reterritorialisation of a term that has been used to abject a population can become the site of resistance, the possibility of an enabling social and political resignification” (Butler 1993: 231). Elsewhere, she further suggests that resignification is to be understood in terms of parody:

there is subversive laughter in the pastiche-effect of parodic practices in which the original, the authentic and the real are themselves constituted as effects...The parodic repetition of gender exposes as well the illusion of gender identity as an intractable depth and inner substance...As the effects of a subtle and politically enforced performativity gender is an ‘act,’ as it were, that is open to splitting, self-parody, self-criticism, and those hyperbolic exhibitions of ‘the natural’ that, in their very exaggeration, reveal its fundamental phantasmatic status (Butler 1990: 147).

In short, the performance of gender parody—the transferability of gender ideals—is the means by which Butler operationalizes resignification-as-agency within her performative thesis.

Lloyd (1999) argues that Butler’s use of drag, and the idea of gender parody more generally, as an example or metaphor for agency, raises questions about her performative

thesis. Most notably, the distinction between the performative and a resignifying performance/practice is not clear. In making this distinction Butler writes,

performance as a bounded 'act' is distinguished from performativity insofar as the latter consists in a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain and exceed the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer's 'will' or 'choice'; further, what is 'performed' works to conceal, if not to disavow, what remains opaque, unconscious, unperformable. The reduction of performativity to performance would be a mistake. (Butler 1993: 234)

Lloyd (1999) counters, however, that it is hard to understand and maintain this distinction because the signs and practices taken up and reworked in performance are necessarily part of the always already heterosexual economy of desire. According to Butler the linguistic or symbolic system through which we are materialised is the only set of resources available to us. Performance is thus "not theatre as self-creation nor self-display, nor as pure invention. It is the performance of certain signs, certain outward codifiers. It is a process of re-signification and not signification *ab initio*" (Lloyd 1999: 202). Performance is thus performative. It "is hard to see what precisely renders a performance discrete from the performative context of gender since both rely upon recitation of the same norms and conventions" (Lloyd 1999: 209).

This distinction is further muddled by the way a discussion of parody as resignifying performance seems to require the presence of an intending subject. Butler is very clear on her notion of the subject, arguing that an intending subject is an effect of discourse, and not the cause of discourse. "The 'activity' of this gendering cannot, strictly speaking, be a human act or expression, a wilful appropriation, and it is certainly not a question of taking on a mask; it is the matrix through which all willing first becomes possible, its enabling cultural condition" (Butler 1993: 7). And yet, the idea of an agent who takes up and in some sense does something that is about resignifying emerges through gaps in Butler's own grammar and syntax as she comments on the possibilities of resignification. When she writes,

The task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat or, indeed, to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, to displace the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself" (Butler 1990: 148);

her language presumes an acting subject capable, in some sense, of repeating and displacing gender norms. Similarly, when writing:

The critical task for feminism is not to establish a point of view outside of constructed identities...[it] is, rather, to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions, to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them (Butler 1990: 147);

she assumes a subject who is capable of locating and affirming local possibilities. And elsewhere, when she writes:

And yet, if repetition is the way in which power works to construct the illusion of a seamless heterosexual identity, if heterosexuality is compelled to repeat itself in order to establish the illusion of its own uniformity and identity, then this is an identity permanently at risk, for what if it fails to repeat, or if the very exercise of repetition is redeployed for a very different performative purpose?" (Butler 1991: 24).

her query about the redeployment of repetition for different purposes assumes an agent able to redeploy. Who or what could repeat, displace, locate, affirm, or redeploy signifiers if not something like a subject or agent? It would seem that a humanist ghost is necessary for Butler to think and write about agency—even within her anti-humanist framework. I am not sure if Butler would argue that the difficulty of speaking about resignifying without some slippage is part and parcel of the way in which discursive practices dissimulate themselves, but I imagine that this would be a likely retort on her part: "the substantive 'I' only appears as such through a signifying practice that seeks to conceal its own workings and to naturalise its effects" (Butler 1990: 144).

There is, however, an alternative way of thinking about this slippage. Rather than articulate experience and social reality as an effect of language—as Butler's linguistic account of power does—and accept the notion that the subject's agency is possible only through language, perhaps it might be useful to understand that language also necessarily discloses our experience and social reality. Within this frame, Butler's grammatical slippage may not be an effect of the dissimulation brought about by discursive practices, but rather an effect of the way language discloses our place and actions. Here, Butler's slippage into the error of assuming or speaking through an intentional "I" may be because there is an intentional "I" being disclosed by language (Csordas 1994, 1999).



In addition to this slippage, Butler's notion of agency is particularly flat, with little social or historical content—how agency is lived and experienced—leaving us with a narrow sense of what agency is about. In short, her account of agency is rather abstract—perhaps disembodied. This abstracted understanding of agency plays into the previous suggestion that Butler's account fails effectively to consider the social and political conditions through which symbolic processes take place. "Butler's explanation of the indeterminacy of the symbolic processes of materialisation provides an abstract account of the structural conditions that give rise to agency, but it lacks a description of how the performative aspects of gendered identity are lived by individuals in relation to the web of social practices in which they are enmeshed" (McNay 1999: 178). Moreover, her linguistic account also constructs a limited or constrained notion of agency. Recall that agency is only about resignifying the already present symbolic system rather than signifying in new or original ways. "This primarily negative account of agency as displacement fails to draw out fully...the ways in which the symbolic realm is composed of conflicting values and resources which may be actively, and sometimes creatively, appropriated by actors to institute new value systems and new forms of collective identity" (McNay 1999: 187). Elsewhere, McNay similarly notes that Butler's performative account

relies predominantly on a version of the Freudian idea of repetition compulsion which is essentially a reactive and according to some commentators, an atemporal concept. This emphasis on the retrospective dimensions of time—the performative as 'a repetition, a sedimentation, a congealment of the past' (Butler 1993: 244)—leads to an overemphasis on the internal uniformity of gender norms. Reiteration becomes a static rather than temporal act where the reproduction of the sex-gender system involves a ceaseless reinscription of the same. (McNay 1999: 102)

Within this system, there is little, if any, room for a forward-looking or proactive conceptualisation of agency. There is only an agent who reacts to the always already discursive system. Lloyd (1999) makes a similar argument in light of Butler's use of psychoanalytic concepts. In identifying the unconscious and psychoanalysis as a means of thinking about gender identity, Butler writes, "Psychoanalysis insists that the opacity of the unconscious sets limits to the exteriorization of the psyche" (Butler 1993: 234). From this, Lloyd (1999) concludes that Butler's conceptualization of the subject removes

the possibility of nearly any agency: “There is, therefore, no possibility of the subject ever being able to fully control or manipulate their gender performances or identifications...The latitude for conscious, critical or self-reflective politics shrinks as the sphere of the unconscious encroaches” (Lloyd 1999: 203). A more active or dynamic notion of performativity is required, where the subject or actor is understood not merely as an effect of repetition, but as one who is able to react to anticipated future potentialities in creative rather than negative or reactionary manners. Here, the notion of agency is tightly constrained. To think of “the socio-symbolic order as a uniform realm of constraint disregards the innovative and dynamic nature of action by confining it to the relatively narrow idea of resistance” (McNay 1999: 187).

### **Bodies in the Underbrush of Discourse**

A source or locus of Butler’s difficulty in dealing with the ideas of the agent and agency emerges when she writes, “Gender is neither a purely psychic truth, conceived as ‘internal’ and ‘hidden,’ nor is it reducible to a surface appearance; on the contrary, its undecidability is to be traced as the play between psyche and appearance” (Butler 1993: 234). Something called a body is a presumed and required conceptual lynchpin in Butler’s analysis.

According to the understandings of identification as an enacted fantasy or incorporation...it is clear that coherence is desired, wished for, idealised, and that this idealisation is an effect of a *corporeal* signification. In other words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of *the body*. (Butler 1990: 136, my emphasis).

Elsewhere, she writes, “gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylised repletion of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the *stylisation of the body* and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which *bodily* gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constituted the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler 1990: 140, my emphasis). Gender is a doing that takes place on and through the body. And insofar as signification is a bodily process, resignification-as-agency is necessarily a bodily engagement. “Just as bodily surfaces are enacted as the natural, so these surfaces can become the site of a dissonant and denaturalised performance that reveals the performative status of the natural itself”

(Butler 1990: 146). The constitutive effects of performative inscriptions are bodily processes.

However, while Butler speaks of “incorporation” and the “corporeal significance” of the discursive practices of the heterosexual economy of desire, it is not at all clear how a body or bodies and discourse come together. While her analysis traffics in the idea that the heterosexual economy of desire is incorporated through a compulsion to recite or reiterate discursive norms, the nature of this incorporation and the body as a site of this incorporation are poorly articulated. In her assessment, Butler seems to gloss over something rather significant: the play between the psyche and appearance necessarily takes place across the surface of the body. It is true that in *Bodies That Matter* Butler begins thinking about how the materiality of the body is an effect of “regulatory power in the Foucaultian sense” (Butler 1993: 10). Here, she argues that to talk about sex—in whatever fashion—is to engage in a performative act: “there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body” (Butler 1993: 10). I take seriously the suggestion that the nature, limit, and morphology—even what constitutes a body—are discursively maintained and accept the idea that there is no body before discourse. However, the bodies investigated throughout Butler’s work are textual bodies or abstract, thought bodies—bodies literally made from words rather than living bodies materialised from linguistic practices. As a sociologist and ethnographer, I am compelled to ask, “What of lived empirical processes by which discursive practices do their constituting magic?”

In light of these considerations, a question emerges. Does the lack of attention to the body and embodiment lead Butler to a place where agency becomes possible only as an effect of a subject-less symbolic resignification? I think that the answer to this question is yes. The complexities that Butler’s performative thesis create for the idea and experience of agency emerge, I believe, out of Butler’s scant consideration of the nature of the body and embodiment. Differently, the difficulties emerging from Butler’s provocative and challenging thesis—its bugs—are an effect of a poorly tended body in the underbrush of discourse. The nature of the body, what the body is, how we might understand the body, or how a body feels is not outlined clearly in Butler’s work. By not fully articulating the body’s nature within the performative thesis, Butler loses sight of

where our engagement—and hence practice and change—with the world begins: our embodiment.

### *Bugs and the Circuit*

These conceptual problems lead to similar puzzles when the circuit experience is thought about in relation to the notion of practice and change permitted in light of Butler's performative framework. Overall, circuit attendees experience what constitute moments of empowerment—feelings of freedom, the capacity to act—in ways that would not register as change or control within Butler ideas:

I was sitting on the beach, trying to read. The weekend's parties were still not entirely written down but I needed to do something else. I caught sight of Eric walking his dog. He has a slightly tousled thatch of thinning blond hair he keeps quite short. He's got a little boy quality about him, playful almost and he reminds me of Dennis the Menace, despite his six-foot frame. We smiled hello, re-introduced ourselves. After asking if he could join me, he seemed happy enough to chat with me and our conversation wandered, as I expected it would, to our assessments of the weekend's parties. He described himself as "shy and a bit insecure" and that these events began to show him otherwise. He said he had spoken to his counsellor about how they made him feel—empowered, attractive—and that her advice had been to "go to these events more often." What did he say? "everybody is your friend"; "everybody greets you, comes up and says 'hello'"; "and then I get this attention from all these hunky guys"; "everyone is equal and the same"; "a sense of brotherhood. He's been galvanised to make changes in his life through these events. He spoke of his desire to not be so meek and shy, to go about being a bit more active in approaching people and doing things in relation to meeting others. He was excited about the events, describing himself as not really having much of an opportunity to be gay, and now coming to Vancouver to find "this". (Fieldnotes 1999)

Clearly, in and through this dance experience, Eric has found a sense of agency—an opportunity to be gay, *empowered, attractive*—in a way that was about community: *everybody greets you, comes up and says 'hello'*. I find it hard to imagine Eric not being able to experience a sense of friendship and camaraderie—he is a warm, effusive and charming man who seems eager to please those around him.

But, in this case at least, his experience of agency, of change, of empowerment, of having an opportunity to be gay, were mostly—perhaps entirely—premised on his capacity to experience certain kinds of pleasure within the circuit experience. Eric's

capacity to experience these pleasures is intimately connected to the fact that he has the right uniform:

As I'm talking to him now, and writing about it, I'm drawn back to when I first saw him. He looked exquisite, back-to-back with Ray. Very tall—over six feet—and extremely well put together. If there was a muscle in his body, Eric had found it and sharpened it. I remembered Eric's torso—well defined abs, shorts hanging low, well below his navel, and behind Eric, Ray's huge back; Eric's eyes were closed, a smile on his face, content; the tanned line across Ray's ass well defined, his pants hanging below his waist line. Both were moving and grinding out their own sexy grind to the music. (Fieldnotes 1999)

Part of Eric's capacity to feel empowered and attractive—and to engage in novel practice, feel empowered—is premised, in many respects on his diet, weight, and workout routine, on his willingness to embody certain gender ideals through considerable attention to his body:

We were talking about his workout and diet. He said because he lives in a small town, he doesn't do much but go to the gym. He said that he "ate like a scientist: chunk white albacore tuna, brown rice, whole-wheat brown bread, lots of vegetables." Ran for 45 minutes before his workout. "Which isn't good if I want to bulk up." I told him "You seem heavy and lean enough." He replied, "I weigh about 195-197, I want to be about 200" (Fieldnotes 1999)

These efforts pay off predictably and, frankly, spectacularly. This is to say that Eric carries the right uniform, fitting well within the circuit's economy of pleasure and, in light of this, is able to feel and experience a sense of belonging.

In many respects, Eric's sense of agency creates a question when situated within Butler's analysis. I find it hard to construe Eric's experiences in terms of resignification—he is clearly operating *within* the circuit's gender ideals; with his buff body and huge size, there is not much about his appearance that does not resonate with the circuit's gender ideals. Eric's sense of agency, empowerment, a capacity to act, takes place *within* the terms of the heterosexual economy of desire and not through the resignification of this economy. As a subject who is not engaged in some practice of resignification or parody, it is hard, within Butler's framework, to account for Eric's sense of agency. Eric's empowerment and sense of feeling attractive are about his capacity to be, and remain, intelligible within this economy of pleasure. His work out

routine and diet certainly do speak to a reiteration of hegemonic gender ideals that are materialised—quite literally—as muscle.

Eric is likely aware of the fact that his diet and workout routine are part and parcel of what it is that makes him feel empowered and attractive and he is aware of what counts within the circuit's economy of pleasure:

He referred to them as skinny guys, and I believe he was with them at the Saturday event. While dancing, they were apparently touching him: "I was fine with them touching me in a non-sexual way. That was fine."  
(Fieldnotes 1999)

I would not be too surprised if Eric were to think about his diet and workout in terms of a constraint (as, for example, something he feels he must do, for fear of getting fat), recognising that to be fat or otherwise not his exquisite self would mean a loss of attraction. This does not resonate with Butler's analysis. In no sense does Butler suggest that intelligibility is about agency. Intelligibility is about a compulsion—we are compelled to remain intelligible or become non-subjects. Eric, however, was able to experience a sense of agency in light of the fact that he operates within the gender ideals of the heterosexual economy of desire. And while it could easily, and accurately I think, be argued that his sense of empowerment is about privilege and premised on the exclusion of others—or perhaps aspects of himself—this would not account for the fact that in constraint and through his body, he found agency.

A supporting contrast emerges in light of Frank and Bill's consideration of their bodies within the circuit experience. Both understand themselves as average guys and neither seems to be as focused as Eric on their diet and workout routine:

Yeah. I'm pleased to be in the average category. I will never be or have the body I was aspiring to maybe five years ago when I started to work out. I would have loved to be like big. I realised that I'm going to never get like that. It's not a concern for me anymore. I'm happy with the body I have. I'm comfortable going around with what I have. So being average is fine with me. I don't expect other people to have a body like Adonis.  
(Bill)

Being exposed to so many different bodies at these events is one thing. Having attention paid to me by really good looking guys and really huge guys and guys that I consider quite average like myself makes me realise that the body image is not as important as I think it is. It's not so much

everyone wants to look the same it's having something unique. Let's put it that way. (Frank)

Notably, while neither Frank nor Bill is too concerned with a perfect body, there is little in their own analysis of the circuit experience that could be considered resignifying. Both participate in and support the circuit's normative gender ideals. This is not, however, to suggest that these men—Frank in particular—do not have a critical or mature understanding of the pressures to look good:

I think the obsession with muscles is rampant in the circuit scene, but I think if you tackle whatever is bothering you that particular week or two weeks or two months ahead of time [you'll be fine]. As long as you feel like you look good, as long as you feel good, yeah. Sometimes it doesn't take much. Sometimes it'll take a week. Like, if you haven't worked out for months, then it'll take maybe a week going back to the gym. And you know, you're not what you were last summer, or something like that, but it doesn't matter. You still feel good. (Frank)

It is to suggest that they experience their pleasures within the circuit's terms, in a way that suggests agency, a sense of being attractive, empowered:

I've found I'm most attractive when I don't feel I look my best. That sounds kind of odd, but I seem to be a lot more approachable. People approach me a lot more when I don't feel I've been looking my best. There was one Black and Blue that I went to and I hadn't been working out and I felt really sloppy and got lots of attention, even though I didn't feel as though I looked my best. So I've sort of moved off the looking your best thing, I'm not as fanatic as I used to be. But [the working out] is still part of the whole preparation. You wanna feel good. You wanna look good. (Frank)

As self-declared average guys, both Bill and Frank are less intelligible within the circuit's economy of pleasure than say a figure like Eric and both are clearly operating within the circuit's economy—attention to the body is still part of the whole preparation. *You wanna feel good. You wanna look good.* Both, however, experience the circuit in agentic terms without being implicated in resignifying. In fact, Frank's sense of self has been empowered in light of his experience with circuit parties:

Also, I think through circuit events I've grown to love my body a lot more. I know that my body is kind of unique and not the kind of body you see on the front of Men's Health. But there is something attractive about my body that all the elements work together. And so I've come to accept that and like that about myself because you see so many different body types. And Bill and I have noticed too that we are not necessarily attracted

to the front cover of *Men's Health* all the time. We are attracted to all kinds of different men for different reasons. (Frank)

Here, contrary to Butler's suggestion, intelligibility—a reiteration of gender ideals—brings with it the possibility of agency. There is an experience of agency within the system that is not so much about resignifying as it is about operating within the system and its constraints.

In the context of the circuit, then, Butler's thinking presents us with two problems. On the one hand, her conceptual toolbox is not attentive to the social structures and conditions that make re/signification more or less possible. On the other hand, it is difficult to account for modes of agency—or novel practice not commensurate with normative structures—based on intelligibility and signification rather than resignification. Differently, her analysis fails to account for the ways in which activities that resonates with, rather than against, an apparently constraining set of social relationships, are experienced as empowering. How do we reconcile the fact that repetition is experienced as innovative and empowering rather than as constraint?

How then, might these two difficulties be addressed while maintaining some of the key dimensions of Butler's analysis? Two key pieces of information are necessary. The first is to understand that signifying practices must be understood in relation to their social and somatic embedded-ness. Signifying practices are not merely symbolic or discursive—they are profoundly and irreducibly social and bodily as well. A second point is to understand that agency or innovative practice must be understood as something that occurs within and against constraint that may not necessarily lead to a reorganisation of those conditions of constraint. Both of these issues emerge when we consider Eric, Bill, and Frank's experiences of the circuit. The empowering practice emerging in their circuit negotiations are understood and experienced through bodily pleasure made more or less possible by social location—in a way that does not undermine or transgress the normative ordering in which they are situated. How might these innovative practices and actions—experienced through the body and bodily pleasure—in the apparently normative context of the circuit be framed in a way that speaks to the sense of empowerment threaded through these experiences?

To begin setting the groundwork for answering this question—I turn to a close consideration of the object of study at hand: circuit parties. In the following chapter, I



introduce the reader to the nature of the circuit—its complexities, contradictions, and confusions with the aid of those most invested in the circuit. While this discussion—both analytical and descriptive—serves to create for the reader a strong sense of what the circuit is “about” it also serves a broader function of opening enough room to begin suggesting that there are other analytical approaches that might be productively used to think about the circuit. In particular, in Chapter 2 I set up the empirical and theoretical groundwork needed to outline how ideas and challenges presented by Butler’s analysis might be addressed through the work of Pierre Bourdieu.

## *Chapter 2*

# *10,000 People, Fireworks, Drag Shows, Big DJs, and Beautiful People*

In the following chapter I draw from my own ethnographic reflections and the reflections offered by interview subjects to create for the reader a fuller sense of the experiential texture or contours of a circuit party—to offer the reader an understanding of what a circuit party is “about”. I begin by exploring the technical details of a circuit party—the structure, organization, and set up attendees expect when they hear the moniker “circuit party”. An event missing these qualities is not, in any likelihood, something attendees will understand or identify as a circuit event. Importantly, however, as Andy made clear, a circuit event is more than a large scale dance event with all the right technical or structural details. Attendees assume the presence and attendance of a particular crowd that holds particular ideas and values in common. As a means of exploring these ideas and values—and giving the texture and contours of circuit events a fuller elaboration—I listened to and prodded for attendees’ reasons for attending a circuit event, occasionally asking interview subjects “So, why do you go?”

In charting out these contours, I rely mainly on the ideas attendees use to distinguish the circuit from other similarly shaped events or venues—raves, large dance clubs. The following discussion is, then, mostly an emic or “indigenous” understanding

of the circuit. While I would hardly argue that all circuit attendees hold the interpretations outlined in this chapter, I would wager that many who attend circuit events with any regularity would adopt or work with most of these interpretations. In some places—particularly in the discussions of sex—I exercise a stronger interpretive energy. Here, I tease out a series of issues that, while not clearly articulated by attendees, nonetheless represent contours or aspects that are useful in charting out, for the reader, what the circuit is “about”.

The following chapter is broken into two major sections. In the first section, I use the voices of those interviewed to help introduce the technical aspects of a circuit event—the structure and organization of a circuit party. These technical aspects—like the length of a party or its placement in relation to other events—do not, by any means, exhaust all that a circuit party is. *Just putting on a party and putting a DJ up there doesn't make a circuit party*—it requires the presence of a crowd of attendees who have a particular set of understandings and motivations about *what you are doing there*. In the second section, I draw on Peter's explanation as to why he attends circuit events as a way of elaborating on these understandings and motivations. I conclude with a brief summary, suggesting that the dominant understanding is one which identifies the circuit as a confirmatory celebration of gay men's identity and community. I close this chapter by suggesting that as with all emic interpretations, there are likely to be a variety of interpretations that do not fall within the terms set out by the attendees interviewed. I raise these alternative—and at times competing—interpretations in Chapter 3.

## **The Circuit Party Proper**

Crudely, a circuit party is a social, improvised dance experience—on the surface the activities look no different than what one might find at a rave—or even a nightclub or bar. DJs offer continuous and seamlessly mixed music to attendees, who respond by dancing in an improvised fashion. All those who do the circuit would, however, take pains to make it clear that anyone who has attended a circuit event will be able to see distinct differences that set a circuit event apart from a rave, a bar, a night club, even most after-hours venues. Perhaps not so obvious to an outsider is the assumption that those mixing the music will be particular personalities. There exists a constellation of circuit party DJs that rise and fall in popularity for any number of reasons and a relatively

clear understanding of who is not a circuit DJ. Paul Oakenfold is a particularly talented DJ, but it is unlikely he would ever spin a set at a circuit event. Alternatively, Marc Anthony, whose musical styling is similar to Oakenfold's, is quite likely to appear at a circuit event. This then, might be the first technical criterion of a circuit party: the DJ line up. An attendee's decision to attend a circuit event will frequently—and at times entirely—depend on which DJ is spinning.

It would also appear that a central aspect of a circuit party has to do with the actual number of parties offered. A dance event, it seems, is a circuit party provided it comes in a package with other large scale dance events:

A circuit party for me is more than just one day. If it's just a one night thing then I just call it a "gay party" or a "circuit-type party"—but not a circuit event. (Sam)

Indeed, the bulk of the events commonly construed as circuit parties occur over the course of a long weekend, often beginning with an opening or kick-off party on Thursday or Friday and ending with a closing or recovery party on Sunday or the holiday Monday. Viva Las Vegas, a circuit weekend taking place in Las Vegas during October offers five parties over the course of three days while the circuit events associated with Orlando's 2002 Gay Days amounted to six over the course of three days.

The qualification "circuit party" also depends on the length of a party. Indeed, with the timing and number of events at Montreal's 1999 Black and Blue Festival, is was conceivable for an attendee to begin dancing at 10 o'clock on Sunday evening and, excluding transportation from one venue to the next, dance continuously until 6 o'clock Tuesday morning. Overall, organizers offer enough parties such that an attendee could dance for nearly every hour of the long weekend. Of those whom I spoke to, attendees regularly attended between three and four parties over a long weekend, with durations between 6 and 12 hours each. My own experience at Orlando's Gay Days in 2001 was not, I believe, atypical: I attended four different events over the course of three days.

Marc's definition also includes the number of participants attending:

If you were to ask me to define a circuit party, I think I would say it would have to be a large event. I don't know—5000 or 3000—somewhere in there. (Marc)

For Frank, a particular focus or reason for the party distinguishes a circuit party from other large scale dance events. One could

also include as a circuit party a Gay Pride celebration or San Francisco's Folsom Street Fair—both have a series of dance events connected to them. (Frank)

I guess a circuit party is a series of events over the course of a weekend where a bunch of men gather together because it's a long weekend or a celebration of Pride. That's what a circuit party is for me. (Bill)

The exact nature of this focus, for many parties is, however, somewhat vague. While some of the events might be understood as circuit events—like the San Diego Zoo party or Toronto's Unity party—fall around a particular city's summer Gay Pride celebrations, (which occur at different weekends depending on the location) many do not. That they fall on holiday weekends would seem to be more about having the space and opportunity to host an event than anything else.

This is not to suggest that all of these events lack a focus or that they are not celebratory. The organisers of some events—Montreal's Black and Blue Ball in particular—make concerted efforts to present the event as a way of celebrating a gay community as well as a mechanism to remember those gay men who have died as a result of AIDS. The Black and Blue Ball also devotes portions of its proceeds to HIV/AIDS support groups and gay and lesbian community groups. By its own estimation, the organisers of the Black and Blue Ball have donated over \$900,000 dollars since its inception in 1991. The Winter Party held in Miami directs funds to the Dade Human Rights Foundations and claims donations of \$800,000 since its inception in 1994.

At the same time, there are attendees who find the claim that circuit party promoters donate monies to charity or community organisations to be beside the point, or worse, dubious:

For me personally I go because I enjoy the experience. The whole act of fundraising and things that come with it—that's not an issue for me. It's not that I don't care or I'm not interested—it's just that the party doesn't mean something more to me because my ticket ends up going to help the gay community financially. For me I'm there just for the party. Of course I like it that the money I spend goes to those things, but I'm not going there just because of that. (Andy)

I'm not sure I accept any claims about community or HIV. They don't heavily promote or advertise how much funding they raise or where the money goes. The Black and Blue does a better job of making sure everyone knows the money is going back to the community. A lot of them are done by promoters and they're the ones that are getting rich. I haven't seen anything. Do they contribute? I have no idea. I don't think I see it. A lot of them don't give back much and some of it's very token— very token. A lot of that they do it so it helps the ticket sales. I won't mention names but some local promoters in this town — they flip off a buck out of whatever is— I don't even know if it adds up to that much. It's not very much for the charities is it? (Tom)

For Andy the thought of proceeds doesn't figure heavily into his understanding of a circuit party and Tom is quite sceptical about the claim. The ideas that seem to surround the “origins” of circuit events have to do with the suggestion that they emerged as fund raising and celebratory events for gay men. It would be fair, I believe, to argue that there exist a range of possibilities—some events and promoters donate significant funding to community organisations while others run for-profit production companies.

In addition to a focus, Bill also thinks about a circuit party in terms of the history of a particular party's successes at being a *good party to go to*:

It's a bigger scale event for a specific reason—Pride weekend or because over the years this place on this day has developed and attracted a lot of people and the event has become a good circuit party to go to. (Bill)

Bill elaborates by suggesting that the title “circuit party” is

kind of earned after a series of attempts by a producer or a production company to make a circuit party. Let's take Snowball—it is a circuit party now. But if you look at that maybe five years ago, where it was just maybe 500 or 700 people, I don't think it was a circuit party, as such, at the time. But now it's what? Two thousand people? I think circuit party events earn the title. (Bill)

Multi-day parties, attracting large numbers of participants—in the thousands—that are fairly long in duration—6 to 8 hours at least—with a history of success are what these men understand as circuit parties. Ben offers a neat summary:

I think size. I think it's basically size. I don't think if you have 1200 people it is a circuit event—and if you have 800 people then it is definitely not. I think it's basically if people specifically come from other areas to a location for an event. If that happens, then it would be more approaching a circuit event. So if people came from all over. To me, it's a combination of size and who goes to them and it's also frequency. (Ben)

“One-off” events that do not have a history and are not long enough are not easily understood as circuit events.

And yet, large scale dance parties that have these technical requirements—multi-day events, with a large number of attendees, that are long enough, and have a history—can be experienced as less than a circuit party—as a “*gay party*” or a “*circuit-type party*.” As Bill points out, Snowball, the closing party of Altitude, Whistler’s annual Gay Ski Week, is, by most accounts a circuit event. The event has a ten year history, regularly draws well known circuit DJs, and offers several parties that approach eight hours in length. However, for Sam, Snowball doesn’t quite feel like a circuit party:

for some reason I don’t classify them as circuit parties. They definitely are circuit parties, but for us—because they are on our home turf—they are a little different. (Sam)

When asked whether or not Snowball constituted a circuit party, both Marc and Scott disagreed with Sam—for them, Snowball *was* a circuit event:

Yeah I do think it’s a circuit event, because of the scale. It’s pretty big. It’s not 5000 people, it’s what? It’s only three thousand people, but there’s more than one event, there are international DJs, and there are people from all over the world. (Marc)

I do think that Snowball is a circuit event and I think Vancouver Pride is moving that way too. Especially after last year—more and more tourists are coming. Hotels for this year are already sold out. So even Vancouver Pride is starting to make that transition. (Scott)

While both Marc and Scott disagree with Sam’s categorisation of this event as a non-circuit event—potentially complicating this attempt to define a circuit party—two things are worth considering. On the one hand Sam qualifies his categorisation, suggesting that while they are a bit *different*, they *definitely are circuit parties*. On the other hand, while there is some disagreement about categorizing, all three agree on one salient point. While Marc points out there are people *from all over the world* who attend this event and Scott notes that there are *more and more tourists*, Sam is a bit reluctant to categorize the Whistler event as a circuit party because it is on his *home turf*. What is clear is that one goes *away* to a circuit event: a circuit party is a special event, something that calls you away—literally—from the ordinary everyday.

This particular contour becomes clearer when attendees compare circuit parties to other spaces in which gay men might congregate to dance: dance clubs and after-hours venues. While Bill is willing to describe an after-hours venue as *like a circuit party event*, he is only willing to do so provided it is not a local event and extends beyond a single night:

I guess all sorts of after-hours things or events that are going all night could be like a circuit party. Maybe not like a regular Saturday night here at home, but everywhere else, when you go and there's a series of more than one—in that case it is like a circuit party event. (Bill)

Hmm. I've had some good nights at some of the bigger American clubs—but I guess because they are kind of a mini-vacation combined with a circuit party so it's a little bit different. You probably see the same guys on the dance floor for one or two or three nights. There are some similarities—the music, the men, the drugs. Those nights don't tend to have the same special effects or lighting or like entertainment so they are kind of missing. They are missing the carnivalesque sense that circuit parties have. Circuit parties have a feeling that it's all organised and it's part of a theme or something—a feeling of a larger event. (Sam)

Marc, commenting on large scale dance events associated with Gay Pride celebrations in Toronto and Vancouver, makes a related observation:

The stuff that we did in Toronto recently and the stuff that happens in Vancouver—I don't think they're really circuit events. They are not really circuit events because I think it has to have an international draw to make it a real circuit event. From what I understand about the history of the circuit, it's about traveling, it's about meeting people. (Marc)

By way of a brief summary, a circuit party involves a collection of large scale dance events—certainly a series of more than two—offered over the course of a weekend that attract attendees in the thousands. The parties themselves are long—at least six hours—and are expected to involve particular kinds and styles of entertainment and talent (with expected and known circuit DJs, the continuous mixing of music, particular kinds of lighting qualities, and particular shows or performances). A circuit party is also an event that has a particular focus—a celebration of some kind—and a history. Dance events do not “become” circuit events just because they are organized and produced. These technical aspects—the number of parties, scale or size, history and purpose, the out of the everyday experience, the quality of the performance—are what help to constitute a dance



event as a circuit party; they are the props and processes that need to be in place in order to invoke the circuit experience.

Yet, these technical aspects do not, in themselves, necessarily lead to an event that attendees will label a “circuit party”. Andy’s comments help specify these expectations:

You know, just putting on a party and putting a DJ up there doesn’t make a circuit party. It needs the idea of what you are doing there; it needs the look, and it needs the crowd. (Andy)

There is more to a circuit event than the right technical aspects—like *putting a DJ up*. For an event to be understood as a circuit event it must begin to involve or approximate a series of social expectations. I take three related ideas from Andy’s comment. First, the moniker “circuit party” depends on the presence of a *crowd* of attendees who share, on the one hand, a particular *idea* or understandings of what they are *doing there* and, on the other hand, an appreciation and understanding of a particular *look* associated with the circuit. If an event attracts a *crowd* without the right *idea* or appreciation of *the look*, the event is not at a circuit event—it is something else altogether.

As a means of exploring Andy’s suggestion that a circuit party *needs the idea of what you are doing there* I directed my attention to attendees’ motivations, asking at times, “So why do you go?” Peter responded:

I’m there for the same reason as others. I’m there for the music, the sex, the drugs, meeting people, being in a gay space, being uninhibited for a night, and forgetting the real world. (Peter)

Peter’s comment is particularly instructive. It captures many of the motivations and understandings—the ideas *of what you are doing there*—offered by attendees during interviews. Below, I use Peter’s comments as a way of further specifying the nature of *the idea* Andy argues is so central to the circuit.

### ***I’m There for the Music (and Dancing)***

When Peter says *I’m there for the music*, he also goes, presumably, to dance—I have watched him dance: he does it well and spends the bulk of his night doing so. As Tom pointed out *circuit parties seem to be about a dance floor*. Dale, as well, observed:

People at circuit parties are there for one purpose—to have a good time and dance. They don’t stand around—they are all there to dance. In clubs

people drink, they stand around, they chit-chat—but at circuit parties they are all there to dance. (Dale)

Indeed the vast bulk of the physical space in which a circuit party is located is devoted to the dance floor, most of the time attendees spend at a circuit party is devoted to dancing, and the bulk of any interaction between attendees occurs while they are dancing.

Other zones of interaction include refreshment and chill out spaces—small, usually separate areas, in which patrons may sit, talk, relax, or wait out the worst effects of drugs. Music in chill spaces is frequently quieter than that heard on the dance floor—more ambient—accompanied by lighting treatments or visual displays designed to induce relaxation or enhance the hallucinatory effects of any drugs consumed. Bathrooms occupy a related site of importance—for obvious and not so obvious reasons. Chill out spaces and bathroom stalls become both sites for sex as well as sites in which some fish drugs out of pockets away from security or the threat of dropping or spilling something on a dance floor. Areas less traversed by attendees are production offices, the DJ booth, and coat-checks. While the DJ booth is of central importance to the event—indeed without the DJ there would be no event to speak of—it is generally removed in some sense, placed higher up, away from the crowd. Management takes pains to ensure that patrons do not interrupt or disturb the DJ—a task that can prove difficult given the superstar status some DJs attain. Occupying a less significant place among these zones of interaction might be medical facilities and first aid stations increasingly provided for the purposes of drug overdose or overuse management. Overall however, the forays attendees make into these zones are relatively short; most are to be found either moving between these points or, for the most part, on the dance floor.

Given that the act of dancing is something attendees understand to be a central plank in the circuit experience, it is worth, briefly, considering the contours of this dance. In many respects, dancing at a circuit event is similar to what one might find at a rave and some larger clubs; it is self-directed. One does not invite or ask another to dance—as in “Would you care for a dance?” Attendees simply search for an appropriate space on a dance floor and begin dancing with friends and partners. At best, an observer might hear, “Let’s go dance”, directed at no one in particular and all of those within earshot in general. To make the observation that this dance is self-directed is not, however, to suggest that it is not social. As a form of dance, it is quite social; attendees dance in

relation to each other, becoming spectator, object, and partner. As a form of social dance, it is not, however, *necessarily* partnered or coupled. Attendees just as frequently—perhaps more often than not—dance large portions of their night in small groups loosely organized along lines of friendship. Couples do, of course, dance in a partnered fashion, directing energy and interaction to each other, but there remains a strong tendency to dance with “everyone”.

As a form of social dance, dancing at a circuit event is something attendees improvise, engaging in a bodily interpretation of the music in relatively idiosyncratic and personal ways. Each individual adopts and develops his own style and follows no formally defined or articulated choreography. Moreover, the dance floor does not move in any particular direction—as one might witness among ball room dancers or as was outlined by Limon (1994) in his discussion of dance among Mexican American in Texas. To point out that attendees engage in improvised dance is not, however, to suggest that the dance is random or chaotic. The shape and texture of dancing behaviour witnessed at a circuit event is informed by a rather complex set of spatial, temporal, and social considerations and expectations.

The construction of the dance floor itself represents one of the major constraints in which attendees carry out their dancing work—a space that is as much a physical space as it is a social and temporal space. A focal place is obviously important insofar as attendees need some place to dance. It is also the means by which a promoter can organize and control patrons as well as create enough critical mass to ensure that patrons enjoy themselves. Some venues—like Montreal’s Metropolis Club in which the Black and Blue Festival’s Military Ball is held or the Hard Rock Café at Universal Studios in which Orlando’s Gay Day’s Coliseum Party is held—have actual dance floors: areas cordoned off by short walls, hardwood or plywood dance floors, and staging. Other spaces—sports centres, hotel ballrooms, the grounds of Disney’s MGM studios—do not have anything that resembles a dance floor. Under these conditions, a promoter will use physical means to organize and delimit a dance floor. The positioning of the DJ booth, the actual installation of a dance floor over a carpeted ballroom, video screens and scrims, cloth dividers, and metal barricades all represent some of the means by which an organizer delimits a dance floor. Frequently lighting trusses above or around the dance

floor function to mark a dance floor as do the position of speaker stacks. In conjunction, these factors make it fairly obvious as to where dance floors begin and end—and hence where dance occurs. That a venue has an actual dance floor, or that a promoter takes steps to delimit a dance floor, does not entirely determine where dancing occurs. Thus, while the bulk of attendees dance on the dance floor, those who wish for more room may find themselves dancing on balconies overlooking the dance floor, on the way to the bathroom, at a water bar, waiting for friends, and in chill out areas.

As much as dancing is informed and delimited by the physical dimensions of a dance floor, it also occurs within a tableau created by the musical mixings of the DJ. Some DJs make a name for themselves by choosing music programs with more vocal elaborations, others for hard house, others for their preference for trance. Circuit goers could claim that there is an identifiable circuit sound—a point that the music industry has come to understand—woven together by a constellation of circuit DJs. A DJ's musical set typically lasts anywhere from 4 or 5 hours to 12 or 14 hours. It is relatively common for more than one DJ to make an appearance at a circuit event—with a lesser known DJ beginning the event and better known DJ starting later in the events course. Ideally, and typically, DJs mix music in a seamless and continuous flow and do not, in any fashion, do anything but construct a musical soundscape. Occasionally, DJ changes might be announced with a short statement of introduction: “Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome DJ superstar Marc Anthony.”

In addition to mixing music in a seamless flow, DJs are also likely to construct a particular program of music over the short and long term, gradually building up the tempo and energy of the music toward a cathartic peak. Shorter build-ups in tempo and energy within and between musical tracks are themselves situated within a larger program of build-up, climax, and denouement that stretches over the course of an evening. The height of a party—its peak—is characterized by music with an average of 130 beats per minute and is usually followed by a program of musical selections with fewer beats per minute and fewer vocals. As the night progresses into the mid-morning or the event nears its completion, some DJs will begin to incorporate morning music—“lighter” music, often remixed “classics”. Regardless of who the DJ might be, attendees expect or assume lighter “fluffy” music, involving soaring vocals and higher energy near

the beginning of an event. Expectations about music later in the evening—often after the peak of an event and early in the morning—often centre on a harder sound with fewer vocals and a much more “dark” edge to it. While dancing earlier at an event may involve more energetic interpretations of soaring vocals—hands raised above the head, vertical jumping, grander gestures with arms—patterns of dancing during the latter portions of a circuit event are somewhat more subdued.

### *The Sex (and The Look)*

When Peter told me he attended circuit events for *the sex*, he touches on the recognized fact that many attend circuit events with some anticipation and intention of finding Mr. Right (Now). Marc characterized circuit events as being like *a-standing-up-not-quite-naked-orgy* while Bill noted:

I mean, the sex is a big thing when I go to a dance party. I always look forward to a little naughtiness, you know being naughty with someone. I don't go specifically for that, but if it happens then it kind of makes my night a little. (Bill)

The evocation of sexual desire is intimately connected to the way promoters and attendees privilege a particular aesthetic or *look*. Desire is evoked through a particularly aesthetic, a particular look, that is hegemonic. The question that emerges is of course: What is this look? Most obviously it is a physical expression of conventional masculinity: muscular, little body fat, attractive, “buff.” Circuit ephemera—promotional material, websites, magazine ads, program guides—are often the first point of access circuit goers have to a circuit event. A quick glance at this material indexes the privileging of a very precise aesthetic. The glossy figures that grace circuit advertisements are invariably muscular and with gym-toned bodies, broad shoulders, well defined arms, v-shaped backs, washboard abdominal muscles, “bubble butts”, and short cropped hair. At events, attendees almost uniformly dance shirtless while semi-clad go-go dancers gyrate on pedestals above the crowd. Images of men chiselled into varying forms of perfection are frequently projected onto scrims and screens around the crowd—a circuit party is, above all, a *very* sexy event.

Before attending more carefully to *the sex*, I want to turn to what Andy called *the look*. As an aesthetic category, *the look* is central to the circuit experience insofar as its

initial impact makes a lasting impression on attendees, forming a major organisational point for how attendees understand the circuit:

My first event was at the Folsom Street Party in San Francisco. And I was just overwhelmed by the size of them, just the size of them. All the men there looked like they all worked out. It was pretty overwhelming, pretty overwhelming. (Frank)

Now you get used to it. But then I was always so amazed, like I thought “My God. All those bodies all those muscles, all those muscles, a sea of buff boys, kind of everywhere, all those guys, all those hot looking men with their shirts off.” It was like heaven. (Andy)

I remember looking up and seeing some of the dancers and I remember—I guess this will come back and haunt me for a long time—being very impressed at their physical being, their size, their muscularity. That is certainly one aspect that impressed me. I was overall impressed and I guess this has probably influenced some of what I have been doing now. (Jaret)

In different ways Frank, Andy, and Jaret’s comments begin to suggest not only the scope or the scale of *the look*—what others noted as its uniformity or sameness—but also the impact of *the look* and the role it plays in how the circuit is experienced. Faced with a *sea of buff boys, kind of everywhere*, a kind of muscle boy *heaven*, Frank found himself *overwhelmed by the size of them* while Jaret relied an even more potent metaphor to frame his experience: *haunted*. Ben’s comments are probably the most succinct in developing a sense of *the look*:

Abercrombie and Fitch is what I think about. *The look*, body fat percentage, and in terms of shape and age. That’s what I picture when I hear “circuit boy.” (Ben)

The ad campaigns for Abercrombie and Fitch clothing are renowned for an attractive, young, and fit collection of collegiate looking models displayed in various states of undress.

The role *the look* plays in the evocation of desire is condensed in the figure of the go-go dancer. Go-go dancers, mounted on podiums, pedestals or stages, wrapped in various stages of dress and undress—leather jockstraps, tight white briefs, g-strings, harnesses, leather chaps, latex shorts, and heavy work boots—draw a crowd to dance:

I put my life and soul into getting up on that podium and even if the music wasn’t good I made it feel like it was good. I wanted the crowd to be influenced by me. I wanted them to believe that that music was the best

they had heard in their life. And I can remember one time when the sound system went funny for about 20 minutes. I don't know what happened. But I can remember being up on the podium, thinking "Ohmigod. We have to make this so good." And I remember just putting out so much energy and playing with the people on the floor so much—just to try and make them have a good time, and not let the music let them down. (Lee)

In addition to drawing attendees to dance, go-go dancers create an audience of spectators who consume and appreciate *the look*:

The whole stage is washed with a layer of mist or fog—could be a cheesy graveyard movie set. The vertical lighting truss on the stage is circular and positioned in the centre of the stage—a quarter of it is buried in the layer of mist that floats across the stage—like a circular gate into the dark of the stage behind. Lights mounted on the truss' outer edge flash on, spin outward, casting wide cones of white and red light away from its centre—the truss looks like a blooming flower, petals unfolding. And through the circular truss emerges what I can only call a go-go god wearing a *very* short pair of shorts. He is stunning. As he moves forward out from the gloom, he disturbs the mist, sending it in gentle cascades in front of him. All eyes turn to him. This is a *big* boy and he *is* undulation. He raises his hands from his side, slowly, following the suspense building in the music, raise them past his shoulders, arms and hands above his head, pulls them down, laces his fingers behind his neck and does this shimmy thing that starts near his shoulders and rolls down to his pelvis. His intercostals ripple and abdominals flex. He turns and rolls his perfect ass to the music, grabs his crotch, moves like oily sex. He spends some time burying his hand in his shorts, cupping his dick, stretches the waist band down so you could see the start of his pubic hair. He moves back and forth between these poses, flexes his legs with each step, pulls his shorts lower and exposes a perfect ass, and in one swift move, strips. He rolls around on the balls of his foot like a snake on its tail, hand coving his dick, other hand above his head in the slightest fem pose. I turned around to look behind me. We were all like deer in headlights—all eyes were on him. Around me people were crushing up to get close and I kept hearing things like "He's hot". (Fieldnotes 2001)

In many ways, the go-go dancer plays a strong role in circulating the value of *the look* throughout the circuit space. He represents one of the more obvious points of exchange. Drawing on a conventional grammar of sexual codes—mimicking sexual acts through their dance, emphasising eroticized body parts through both gesture and dance—the go-go dancer also evokes or incites desire:

The go-go dancers on the stage were behind tall scrims and back-lit, casting huge 15 foot shadows for all to see. And from here it *looks* like

they were fucking, dick-slapping, jerking off—not sure if they were using strap-ons or what, but at times the shadows on stage are convincing. And if I was horny before, these guys kicked things into over drive. The night crawled into my pants. It’s almost ridiculous—I’d hazard to say I’m a bit delirious. (Fieldnotes 1999)

This is not to suggest that attendees themselves do not play off the same codes in their own dance—the go-go dancer is only one, perhaps the most obvious, point where *the look* and desire exchange:

The next morning, we were talking about the dancers, the performers, the go-go dancers, and how they just sort of faded into the background. After a while, you just stop noticing, I mean, there are bodies *everywhere* and you find yourself riled up regardless of where you look. (Fieldnotes 1999)

In light of this evocation of desire through *the look*, the prospect of finding sex at or through a circuit party occupies a significant component of most attendees’ considerations of the circuit and expressions of sexual play and sexual interactions during and after a party are commonplace. Before commenting further on how *the sex* figures into the circuit, I want to engage in a bit of foreplay by giving some consideration to the way in which attendees use touch to organize their dance experience.

### ***Territorialization***

Overall, there is a tendency for dancers to remain in one, or a very few, locations or areas on a dance floor for the majority of an event—what Malbon (1999) in his study of dance clubs in London, calls territorialization. Attendees “scope out” a place on the dance floor that meets their requirements—one close to the chill out room, one close to the DJ, one near the speakers, one near any stage or entertainment, or one populated by “hot men”—and make attempts to settle themselves into that space and in effect, claim it. In many respects, territorializing is about comfort; and about having enough room to move and dance:

We had spent what must have been two hours shuffling about trying to find the right spot in which to park ourselves and *nothing* seemed to be working for us. Some of us wanted to stay where we were—I didn’t and neither did Brian. The rest were whining about something closer to the stage. Seemed like a good spot was anything that wasn’t “too-something-or-other. Not too crowded, too hot, too ugly, too empty, too close to the speaker, too far from the water bar, too near the edges of the dance floor, too near the middle.” We eventually moved further away from the water



bar. But even here I was a bit frustrated—there was a great deal of traffic and bumping. Dancing here was hard because of all the movement—and I remember feeling really frustrated about the way the dance floor was sorting itself out—no one was dancing. It was just this constant movement and shuffle as people wandered from wherever it was they were to wherever it was they were going. I eventually turned to one group and said “Are there any more of you!?” when what must have been the 15th person chained through holding hands. Brian yelled at one of them and said “Just dance, stop moving. Just dance.” We were both a bit addled so I suggested we move again. Drew wanted to come with us, but wanted to tell the rest of them that we were moving. I said we would wait here. He left and returned and we moved a bit farther into the dance floor—but in the end it didn’t mean much of a move. We were pretty well in the same place. And when this was all over, I had to go pee. Felt like we had a starring role in the Princess and the Pea. (Fieldnotes 2000)

Where and how one might settle is also contingent on broader determinates, including macro-factors like the size of the event or even broader world events. Drew offered the following insights:

“One reason it took me so long to find a spot was the size of the space and the approximate 15,000 person crowd. I found the physical aspects of the large space to be overwhelming. I remember feeling a little anxious a few times while trying to find our group. At smaller events, I’ve found it easier to navigate because of the differences in the spaces and smaller crowds. Another thing I thought about was the overall general mood in light of everything that was going on with the 9/11 thing in the States. I mean this wasn’t even a month after that happened—and there may have been a psychological reason, most likely subconscious, that made it take longer for the dance floor to settle. People themselves may have felt a little unsettled uneasy.” (Fieldnotes 2000, Drew)

The demographic structure of a party also has a bearing on the way in which attendees may territorialize a dance floor. Brian, commenting on the Black and Blue event—which attracts a crowd of attendees much more diverse than most circuit events—notes:

“I think this event is a bit an exception because of the diversity in the crowd. This event was a far more mixed party than any of the other parties I’ve been to: there were boys—gay, non-gay, other—and girls—gay, non-gay, other. It’s like that woman said to me on the dance floor: “There is little pockets of “like people” all over the stadium - a group of Asians, groups of straight chicks, and groups of muscle guys. The gay boys need to find one another (friendship through sexuality) and the straight folk need their drugs to kick in and find their friends who they promised to meet up with—with them the process of socializing is completely different. I don’t think the straight people bond or have the same initial

camaraderie as gay men in that environment so they take longer to settle down. And there were lots of them there so that's why it may have taken so long. I think it was about 4:00 or 5:00 a.m. before the floor settled out." (Fieldnotes 2001, Brian)

In the context of an event that is much more mixed, there is a tendency to want to be where "the men are":

A group of girls with drinks and cigarettes in their hands, another girl just standing there, people streaming through holding hands. There were straight kids everywhere. No problem with straight raver kids, but I wanted to be here with men. Someone turned to me and said what I was thinking: "Where are the men?" We moved again. (Fieldnotes 2000)

How attendees choose a spot is also dependent on the degree to which one is—or wishes to be—familiar with those present. In line with the understanding that a circuit event is about leaving the everyday, too many encounters with friends and acquaintances are avoided:

We wormed our way through the dance floor—me thinking to myself that people around me are hating us for doing this—I wanted to get close to the stage, sort of in the front where everyone said they would be. We eventually did find them, but we found them surrounded by people from back home—I mentioned that I wasn't interested in hanging with people I already knew. Drew agreed, pointing out that "People from back home aren't what I came for." Brian was in the same mood: "I didn't come here to dance with people from back home" (Fieldnotes 2000).

Overall, settling into a place on a dance floor serves a relatively critical function: it represents a means of locating oneself among friends and lovers in an otherwise overwhelming number of people. As attendees move about to socialize or cruise, go for refreshment, go for a wander, become too high, or go to chill out, "our" space becomes an orienting point, a home base of sorts:

In retrospect, I feel like the group I was with had three or four "home bases" that night; one by the centre stage, one with the Montreal boys, one by the VIP area, and one by the stands where the rest of my group was. I mean, for us circuit parties are in other cities—where we're not familiar with the city or the buildings. So, as soon as you get there, there's a whole bunch of things you need to figure out. Where are the bathrooms? Where's the running water? Where are my friends? What happens if I get lost? Am I going to get lost? What happens if one of us gets sick? You know it's the safety things that you need to have and all those things have to be taken care of before you can kind of go, "I'm fine, I'm relaxed." (Marc)

Learning about the location of another's home base operates in much the same way:

Someone grabs me from behind and gives me a hug—lifting me off the ground. It's Sean—we catch up for a second and then he says he's got to go for a drink. He then asks if I know where everyone is and proceeds to tell me: "The Toronto boys are over there, just in front of the stage. There's some of the New York crowd there, by those speaker stacks. Our little group is just under that"—he pointed up and over—"disco ball."  
(Fieldnotes 2001)

That I either barely knew or only knew of the various crowds Sean was referring to is beside the point. For Sean, these areas and groups represented kinds of home bases for him—a means of orienting himself and others among those he knew and did not—as well as giving me a sense of where I was in relation to those I knew, knew of, or didn't know.

### **Territorialization and Touch**

As a socially constructed space, attendees territorialize their home bases not only through occupying a particular spot that eventually meets the needs of those involved, but also through a variety of social interactions and mundane exchanges associated with the social, improvised dancing one engages in at a circuit party. These exchanges include the actual dance one might share in relation to another, through small talk, through the sharing of water and drugs, through introductions made between those who do not know one another, or through offers of candy or gum to off set the dry mouth, bad breath, and bruxism (moderate to severe grinding of teeth and locking of jaws) associated with most party drugs. As attendees become familiar with the moods and interests of those they just met—or refamiliarized with those they already know—they chart out a particular spot as "ours". These mundane, polite interactions are part of the processes that not only create and maintain a particular territory as a home base but they also function to populate one's home base with those who belong to a particular group.

One of the more noteworthy strategies through which territory is established is touching. Attendees frequently touch and re-touch those who they know or those who they have just met, receiving and offering hugs, embraces, or massages. Among those already familiar with each other, forms of close dancing are *de rigueur* and on the basis of my observation and experience it is not uncommon for friends and acquaintances to

embrace for long periods of time. It is not uncommon to see small groups of three or four men embracing each other in a shuffling group, tapping out the rhythm of the music on shoulders, backs, and hips only to separate as the music changes and then to fall back into an embrace. In many respects, physical contact is similar to the other forms of social interaction—sharing water or gum—representing a means by which attendees transform mere physical space into meaningful social space set off from the surrounding area. It is also a means by which attendees “populate” their home bases with those they are (becoming) familiar with or that represent their “crew”.

I highlight the act of touching while dancing for two reasons. On the one hand, the act of touching is used by attendees to distinguish themselves from others—particularly straight men:

We were talking about the riots that happened at GM Place, when Guns ‘n’ Roses didn’t show up for their concert. The fans sacked the place and everything was all over the news. Frank paused and said: “When straight boys go out they beat the shit out of each other and trash the place. When we go out, we take our shirts off and hug each other. I’m telling you, we’re a different gender.” (Fieldnotes 2002, Frank)

It is a common place assumption on the part of attendees and promoters that attendees are very unlikely to engage in physical fights. In fact, of those interviewed, only one had witnessed a fight—a significant number given the number of parties each of these men had attended. In Frank’s assessment, it is clear that gay men touch each other in a particular way: while straight men are likely to strike each other with their fist, gay men are more likely to hug each other. This distinction, for Frank, is so strong as to suggest that gay men constitute another gender altogether.

On the other hand, a consideration of touch also allows for a fuller elaboration of *the sex* associated with the circuit experience. If the degree or intensity of attendees’ touch is something attendees use to distinguish themselves, and circuit events, from other groups or events then the sexualized tone of this physical contact begins to solidify this distinction. Much physical contact can have a very clear, if playful, erotic charge. This is apparent in Frank’s thoughts as he tries to clarify the distinction between sexual playfulness that might come with touching and re-touching those around oneself and *actual sex on the dance floor*:

I guess what I'm trying to say, to me, I see not a clear line, it's kind of a fuzzy line, but I do see a difference between just sort of innocent sexual play—like checking out each other's dicks and stuff like that on the dance floor—and having your pants around your ankles. You wouldn't want to be naked on the dance floor having sex with somebody. I know I wouldn't necessarily have actual sex on a dance floor—or if I did catch myself in that position I'd probably stop. There some sort of [pause] it's not inappropriateness, [pause] but it's just not fun any more. (Frank)

The point is not so much that there is sexual playfulness on a dance floor—as Hanna argues (1988) all dance is inherently sexualized and gendered. What is significant for the purposes of specifying the circuit is the nature of the sexual playfulness one might witness on a circuit party dance floor. *Checking out each other's dicks*—literally holding another man's penis or having one's hands down his pants—is not likely to take place in a straight club or a rave. It is also unlikely that the degree of sexual display, like that in the following excerpt, would occur in other venues:

Someone taps me on the shoulder and points. Right beside me, like right beside me, is a tall boy with dark blond hair wearing a cute slutty pair of shorts. He's got the waistband of his shorts hooked under his balls and all his pink bits are hanging out for the world to see. He's got a raging hard-on flopping around in an almost comical way. His eyes are closed and he's dancing the night away. (Fieldnotes 1999)

And while Frank is reluctant to see this sexual playfulness turn into *actual sex on a dance floor*, this transition does happen, ranging from what amounts to heavy petting and mutual masturbation, to oral sex and, occasionally, to sexual intercourse:

I was struggling through the crowd with what felt like a million bottles of water and I literally trip over a guy on his knees giving someone head. Totally hot. I had to stop and watch. A stunning black man has his face buried right to the root of a very cute blond boy's cock. I can't help but watch—it's all unbearably intoxicating. The black guy gets up—I swear I can hear his partner's cock “plop” out of his mouth—and gives a whoop—I'm *sure* the guys he was with were cheering him on. All I can think is “Rock on dude.” Crazy shit. I find the rest of the guys, hand the water out, and to my delight there's another guy on his knees, but everything is safely tucked inside his partner's pants. A guy behind me sticks his head over my shoulder and then turns to his friends. “It's nothing. There's no blow job”. (Fieldnotes 1999)

It is critical to note that not all, not even most, attendees engage in such public displays of sex. There is, among those like Frank, the understanding that sex on the dance floor is

*not fun anymore*. However, even as Sam characterizes sex on the dance floor as being *cheesy*, he does point out that there are places in which sex at a circuit event is appropriate:

I have been sucked off on a dance floor, but I don't let people do that anymore—I try to avoid pulling out dicks and stuff like that on the dance floor. That's just too cheesy. That's what the stalls are for [laughs]. (Sam)

In cases where the potential of sexual play is carried into a more sustained sexual encounter, those interested are likely to move to darker areas of events, bathroom stalls, or, in some cases, to areas actually cordoned off for the specific purposes of having sex. Sydney's Sleaze Ball and Mardi Gras dance events have specific sites for such purposes (Bollen 1994, Lewis and Ross 1995b). The point in highlighting the sexualized charge and play on a dance floor is not to suggest scandal. In no sense do I read this as scandalous. At the same time none of this should be taken to suggest that all, or even most, attendees engage in this sort of behaviour—the vast bulk do not. The point is merely to highlight what amounts to one of the more salient differences between a circuit dance floor and the dance floors one might find in a large straight club or a rave.

### ***The Drugs***

When Peter says *the drugs* he highlights one of the most complex and contentious aspects of the circuit: dancing and drug use are constituent components of the circuit.

Alex made this point particularly clear:

The drugs are a pretty important part of it. Like the drugs make you wanna dance. I don't know what comes first, the dancing or the drugs, but the drugs are a big part of it for me. I like going there to dance, I love dancing. Those two things—dancing and drugs—go together for me.  
(Alex)

The relationship between drug-use and the circuit experience may be one of the most complex and difficult issues to discuss and represent. From the position of participants, a discussion of the relationship between drug-use and the circuit raises what Humphreys (1970) calls the problem of consequentiality: what might be the consequences of this discussion on those who attend, organize, or otherwise invest their lives in some aspect of the circuit experience? This is a particularly complex question given the pejorative interpretation surrounding drugs and drug-use and gay men's communities more

generally. Given the negative valence surrounding drug-use, the possibility of creating an interpretation of gay men who use drugs as depraved or at best lacking intelligence is fairly likely. As one man wryly asked as he learned of the nature of my research project: “Is your research going to end up shutting these things down?”

At the same time, from the position of a researcher, questions about the ethics of conducting research in and around illegal activity brings those closest to this research—me included—under the remote, but not too distant, risk of criminal prosecution. This, of course, touches on a broader ethical issue within social scientific research: whether or not—and how—research about illegal activities should be conducted. In responding to questions about the research on illegal activities, I begin by asking about the assumptions girding any blanket suggestion that researchers should shy away from the study of illegal activities. Most obviously, a major institutional concern is that of liability. Concerns about liability are not, I believe, matters of research ethics but of institutional boundary marking. I understand research ethics to be, first and foremost, about the protection of the subject and society writ large from harm and the process of social science from disrepute. Liability is not, in my estimation, directly or even indirectly concerned with these sorts of protection.

On the specific matter of drug-use, it is patently obvious that use is intimately connected to a host of other social practices and social effects—and the nature, determinates, and effects of this use are poorly understood—regardless of what addictions counsellors and mainstream health practitioners might suggest. If we accept even a fraction of the mountain of research illustrating an association between drug-use and gay men’s health a fuller and more complex understanding of this link is necessary. Common sense understandings suggest that drug use is intimately linked to poorer health—particularly sexual health—while research is unable to establish much by way of causal links. This has not, however, shaped much in terms of policy and practice around drug use and gay men’s health until very recently. As a consequence, the nature of drug use is something in need of study and understanding. Moreover, if we accept that calls to abstinence, and the war on drugs, are a solution available only to some, then it would seem that information about the uses and understandings of drugs would be crucial.

Indeed, given the relationship between drug-use and health more generally—and drug-use and gay men’s health in particular—it would be unethical to avoid the issue.

Among participants, the puzzle that seems to circulate around much of the discussion of drug-use and the circuit experience is one of essence: Can you have the circuit experience without drugs? There is, of course, no clear-cut answer to this question. The role of drugs in any social experience is highly mobile and it could be interpreted that subscribing to a particular understanding of the link between the circuit and drug-use is likely an effect of what one might lose or gain from making the claim. At the same time, however, one would necessarily expect some degree of commonality in how drugs are understood and used within the circuit. Both of these ideas hold true—while the relationship between drugs and the circuit experience is mobile, open to a great deal of personal idiosyncrasy, understandings and patterns of drug-use are systematic and do represent ways of marking strategic boundaries.

To begin then, any suggestion that drug-use is not an integral component of the circuit experience would be, I believe, simply untrue. Without too much fear of statements to the contrary, it could be safely argued that any conversation about the circuit experience will, at some point, reference the effect, nature, danger, availability, or cost of drugs. The centrality of drugs to the circuit experience is an idea interview subjects were particularly candid about:

And I think drugs, drug takers, taking drugs, and all that kind of stuff are certainly essential components of what makes a circuit party a circuit party. But is that what *defines* it? You know, yeah, it probably does.  
You’re probably right. (Marc)

The use of drugs is, in many cases, assumed or expected: Alex expressed frustration at judgments from those who do not attend; they assume *that it’s drug-oriented*. Tom notes that *a lot of my friends figure that if you’re going to them you are automatically doing drugs*. These assumptions made by those who do not attend circuit events do bear some accuracy. Frank, after making a decision to attend an event without the drugs, expressed frustration with the expectations of other attendees:

So I actually got really anxious about going, because I knew it would be assumed that I was taking drugs—and there was no way to get around it. When you’re going there to party and socialise, it’s almost like [taking drugs is] the point—it’s part of the whole thing. So I was really anxious



about going that weekend because of the assumption that drug-use was going to be there. (Frank)

Sam's assessment of the expectations around drug-use are much stronger and cynical—especially when it comes to producers and organisers:

Oh yeah, all the producers that say, “Oh no, we don't promote the use of drugs here”—well, they all know. They all know. A lot of them have deals with drug dealers—they know which drug dealers are working the event. They know who's selling and who isn't. They know everything that's going on—if they're good promoters. (Sam)

Whether and what the producers know about the use of drugs at their events is, of course, up for considerable debate—and I would be unwilling to make the accusation that producers have deals with drug dealers without considerable evidence to support this sort of claim. In any event, the blanket suggestion that those involved in event production necessarily have clear or direct knowledge of the play or role of drugs at these events is dubious:

Well, I was part of the organization of those events since the early 90's and I did not really know what was going on other than to make sure that everything was safe and people were paying and everybody was having fun. I didn't know what was going on [when it came to drugs]. Well, I knew there was *something* going on, but I thought it was more after than during—I didn't have any consciousness about that. I didn't see it happening. I just was not conscious of it. Even when I went to Montreal in '96 or '97, I had no idea. I was naïve. I don't think I was stupid. I just didn't really pay attention to it. (Scott)

At the same time, Sam is quite correct in one sense: any good promoter is well aware of the fact that drug use has a significant role in the circuit dance experience. It is worth noting, of course, that it is productive—from a legal standpoint—for producers and organizers to deny any knowledge of drug-use. While not wishing to contribute to a debate about who is telling the truth, I believe it would be reasonable to suggest that producers are aware that drugs are consumed at their events. And in point of fact, many events incorporate harm reduction information into their events, in the form of posters and postcards, cautioning attendees about the dangers of drug-use. The Black and Blue Festival has taken an important and innovative step, incorporating a two day conference on harm reduction and party health in conjunction with the local medical and legal authorities into its agenda.

Most significant, however, is not so much whether attendees use drugs as is the way attendees understand their drug choices and use in relation to other drugs. All of those interviewed have used, at one time or another, ecstasy (MDMA), Special K (ketamine), GHB (gamma hydroxybutarate), or pot while dancing and the bulk of those I interviewed have at least tried crystal methamphetamine at one point. What is notably absent at a circuit event is the use of alcohol. In fact, many attendees take pains to differentiate themselves from drinkers—particularly in terms of behaviour. Attendees identify alcohol drinkers as being sloppy, messy, unaware of “personal space issues” on a dance floor, and more likely to bump into and disturb those around them. Drug users, in contrast, are not weighed down by the inebriating effects of alcohol and are all in the same head space. Moreover, the depressant nature of alcohol is not conducive to dancing for long stretches at time. Those who begin drinking with any intensity at the beginning of a party will be ready to retire or have passed out by the party’s peak. Those who do use alcohol appear to rely on drugs for the purpose of gaining a high, with alcohol representing a thirst quencher. The use of alcohol is also constrained by a great deal of personal experience as well as mythology around interaction effects. GHB and ketamine mix poorly with alcohol, frequently leading to overdoes and blackouts.

### ***Meeting People, Being in a Gay Space***

When Andy argued that the circuit needs *the crowd* he is touching on the assumption—indeed the expectation—that attendees hold about the nature of who attends circuit events. Scott notes: *Circuit events are mainly gay oriented or almost entirely gay events*. This differentiation is most apparent when attendees compare circuit events to other spaces or events in which one might dance. Frank, thinking about the differences between circuit events and after-hours dance venues, told me:

What makes an after-hours different from a circuit event is that if I went out to an after-hours I would expect to be around a bunch of gay people, but it would primarily be a mixed crowd. Whereas if I would go to a circuit party I would expect all gay men. (Frank)

Ben, in thinking about his experience with after hours spaces, notes that an after hours event

will be more straight than anything else and raves certainly tend to be more heterosexual. And that is just an odd experience for me, because most of the other events where I've had fun were exclusively gay. (Ben)

That circuit events are understood and assumed to be *gay* is more apparent when Sam compared circuit events to raves:

The raves that I go to—you're lucky if 10% of the crowd is gay. Some a little bit higher. (Sam)

There is, however, a sense that some circuit events—particularly the larger ones—are beginning to attract a large number of younger straight attendees. While some understood this mixing as a positive development—indicating that people are more comfortable with the whole “gay thing”—there is also a concern that the events will cease to be gay:

The big mixed ones I've been to segment into straight and gay spaces and I've found that there is enough room on the dance floor so that we can all be happy. On a larger social scale it would be great to see less barriers between us all and I think it's great to be inclusive—as long as it doesn't become their party. If they were to take it over just by numbers and make any decisions—like if they were offended by some gay behaviour, well let them be offended. I guess I don't want to see it become more straight people than gay people. (Tom)

Indeed, the assumption and desire that these events are gay events is not far from what promoters seem to want. Promoters regularly indicate that the events they are producing are “gay events” with partial proceeds regularly going to gay community groups. The Black and Blue Festival bills itself as a gay socio-cultural festival and the drag queen minister of ceremonies of the Black and Blue Ball—after having a troupe of dancers explode from beneath her skirt—introduced the event as “the largest gay party in the world.” Implicit in all these statements is an important assumption that emerges only almost in passing in Franks comment *I would expect all gay men*. This is clearer in both Bill and Ben's comments:

Not too many straight people at the events. I guess everything that is not masculine or gay I would prefer to go without it. (Bill)

The circuit is where I'd have to say gay men—although I can't say women are not part of the circuit—get together. (Ben)

By “gay”, Ben, Sam, Tom, and Bill all mean *gay men*.

It is in this context—where one has the chance of *being in a gay space*—that the most salient understanding of the circuit begins to emerge. This specificity begins to emerge when attendees compare circuit parties to raves:

And there is a pretty strong sense of love and sexual energy at a circuit party—at a rave there is less than at a circuit party. It's more about the party at a rave. (Sam)

From what I've seen at raves is that they all dance facing the DJ and there's very little communication between them. (Scott)

At raves I find that people just focus on the DJ and dance—so there is no eye contact no...I'm sure if you talked to someone they would be friendly but not like at gay circuit parties. At circuit parties you find people on the dance floor holding each other and yakking away and talking and at raves they focus on and face toward the DJ booth and they just dance. I think at raves people's goals are focused more on being high, on the DJ, on dancing and on enjoying their high. At circuit parties it's not as focused like that. And I find with raves, of course, there's no sexual energy. The social and sexual edge is a lot stronger at a circuit party. (John)

What is important here is not so much the accuracy of these attendee's assessments of raves as it is the *way* in which they distinguish raves from circuit events. Circuit events are about *communication, eye contact, holding each other, yakking away and talking*. Raves, by contrast, are understood as events that are primarily about the music and the DJ's performance, about being high—ravers focus on *dancing and just enjoying their high*, and expresses a weaker *sexual and social edge*. In thinking about the circuit, these men highlight aspects of community and belonging while they frame raves in terms of an atomized and individualised dance experience enhanced by the use of drugs.

The themes of community and belonging also emerge when Tom, like Peter, highlights the centrality of *meeting people*:

I think it's probably again, really honestly, about meeting other people. I think that's pretty much why the majority of us go. I think it's just experiencing something with friends. I've never gone to one of these things without sharing it with friends. (Tom)

Clearly while Tom's elaboration—*it's just experiencing something with friends*—begins to suggest that circuit parties are about sharing—his comment still begs a question: sharing what? Peter and Frank suggest a common social location is shared:

I think there's a rebellious component to it. There's a freedom in knowing that you're a sub-group that does this; you're unique. I mean we kept

disco alive and disco evolved into circuit events. So I think we can celebrate our uniqueness, but in a room with 5000 other people that are, you know, doing the same thing. You're all the same in that room or you're there for the same reason, it's a definite sub-group, but you're a distinct sub-group that differentiates you from the rest of society. And there's an excitement to that. (Frank)

I think people are thinking the same thing I am. They're thinking, "I'm going to a gay thing, I'm going to be with people who are like me." I just feel that these are my people and they are like me and a lot of the time they have the same issues as me and a lot of them go through the same shit as I do and a lot of them enjoy themselves the same way I do. And here we are all together. And that's why I don't want straight people at my party because it's my community and I want to be with my people who understand me and who are like me. (Peter)

For Frank, the excitement of being unique, a bit rebellious, and differentiated *from the rest of society* is cause for celebration. In Peter's estimation, the circuit is about sharing a certain distinction—one that appears to be about going *through the same shit* as others. From Peter's attitude toward straight attendees, one might imagine that this *shit* is about having to deal with the tensions and anxieties that emerge as one tries to negotiate a gay identity in an overwhelmingly straight world. Dale offers similar assessments:

I think gay men go because it's like a convention. It's a gay convention. All the boys meet up. All your friends from another city are there—we all meet in one spot because we can't go see everyone individually. But by finding a meeting point and sharing dance—it's the best experience you can have. (Dale)

And while Marc's assessment is somewhat nebulous, Dale is clear that at circuit parties, one shares and celebrates one's sense of self as a gay man with a community—with *all the boys*. Andy and Marc see this sharing in terms of shared drug use:

There is the common feeling that we all do drugs and we almost all do steroids—or at least are aware of it. And when you see someone who says, "I never do drugs" you always think, "Well that's strange. What are you doing here?" (Andy)

I think something else that comes into play in sharing of a common experience with people is even just doing drugs. Once you've taken ecstasy you can relate to other people who take ecstasy. We've all been through our first experience and we've all been through this apprehension state. I think that's part of what establishes a community. Also we're all doing something illegal—but we all feel good about it. (Marc)

For some, like Frank, what attendees share is a history marked by a struggle with HIV/AIDS:

So you get a whole room full of people that are thirty-five to forty-five that have survived [the epidemic] and that's an incredible common thread to weave through that room. There's an incredible survival instinct and it's definitely something you've got—one thing you have in common. But if you have HIV and live your life like this is the last party I go to, not in a negative way, but you live each day to the fullest and then you fill a whole room full of guys with the same attitude that they're going to live each day to the fullest, then there's an incredible energy that you generated. With raves it's somewhat the same in that everyone's there to be seen and everybody's there to be involved in the music and that kind of thing. But they don't have the bonding thing that we have. That's where the HIV and also the uniqueness and all these things that bond us at these big circuit events that make it stand out from rave. (Frank)

Marc articulates a commonality less associated with social location or behaviour:

It's kind of like a united feeling of everybody being kind of in the same headspace with the same energy level. Like sometimes when DJs build the music up and they turn the lights on really bright—and when they do that, when the lights come on, and you can watch people—and they are looking around and everybody's doing the same thing and feeling the same thing. I think that energy travels around the room. (Marc)

Here, shared and celebrated is the energy that emerges from the interplay between sound, light, and dancing.

The nature and depth of this shared experience becomes particularly vivid when Marc relies on kinship metaphors to help capture his experiences:

You know when you get that shared experience? It's on the airplane on the way back. Where you all had this similar set of experiences and you look at a person's expression on their face and you know what they are going through and you know what they are feeling. I don't know what it is—a comfort level? A level of ease with each other? I don't know what exactly it is. But I think there is definitely some kind or some sense of family. (Marc)

Others followed Marc's lead and used family and related kinship metaphors—like Andy's *home*—in their search for the right description:

It's like a feeling of coming home in a way. It's like I'm back with my friends, we are on the same level, and we know why we are here for. Yeah, I pretty much look forward to meeting all the people. I'm always

curious: “Are they there? Is this one here? Is that one here?” Yeah, I consider it as a kind of family thing. (Andy)

There’s all these groups of guys who kind of hang out when we’re at these things. So it is community. In a weird way it feels like family. (Alex)

It is like a family. You go there with your friends and meet up and see them again. And it’s a family in the sense that you go and it’s like a reunion. You go there to party with them and dance and you only get to see them once a year. (Dale)

Others are a bit more sceptical. When I asked Tom about the family metaphor, he was surprised and mostly laughed:

That’s an interesting family. I can’t even come close to describing it as a family relationship. A lot of them are based on superficialities and we show a lot more warmth that we wouldn’t necessarily otherwise show. And that might be the drugs. You embrace someone or you give someone a kiss when you really don’t know much about them or really care for them. (Tom)

And while Sam is willing to concede that one might use the notion of family to capture the experience, it’s not an *intense family* experience:

You don’t know these people well, but maybe you could call it a circuit family or something [laughs]. But it’s not an intense family—but then there’s some that you might know a little bit better that you also see. (Sam)

Whether or not the circuit is a family is not so much at issue here. Rather what I take from the act of framing the circuit in terms associated with the most intimate, enduring, and conflicted relationships we can have is that the circuit—on a good day—can invoke feelings of safety, belonging.

The suggestion that a circuit party is about belonging also manifests itself in a more politicized fashion:

In some ways it’s empowering. And when you go to these circuit events and you see “Sponsored by United Airlines” or “Sponsored by Labatt’s Breweries” or “Sponsored by Smirnoff Vodka” you know that you have a voice—money wise anyhow—that you’ve gained some attention. Because here’s an event that, yeah, duh, it’s all about hedonism and drugs to some extent, right, and yet corporate America is like right behind you sponsoring it. So obviously we have some political clout. Obviously we have somebody’s attention. It’s always neat to go and see a huge American corporation or something and all of a sudden they have their banners there. (Sam)

## ***Being Uninhibited for a Night and Forgetting the Real World***

*Being in a gay space*, meeting and interacting with other gay men, being surrounded almost exclusively by gay men, able to share in a set of common experiences among those who are, in some sense, like family, is a rarity for all but a very few gay men. In this safe context, Peter talks about the chance of *being uninhibited for a night*. In doing so he captures the way a circuit event brings with it intra- and inter-personal breakthroughs. For many, the circuit is a place to let go, where they have the chance to express or develop who they are through an uninhibited expression of the self and one's location in a larger gay community. This is something Tom highlights in his comparison between circuit events and nightclubs or bars:

I think your inhibitions are down, you feel free to—if you see someone you like it's totally appropriate at a circuit party to give them a great big smile or even tell them "Hey you look great," and not even expect anything—just to pass out the compliment. And in direct comparison to the nightclubs or bars, well, you don't do that because it would seem overtly [pause]. It's just more freedom to express yourself I guess. (Tom)

Gay bars and night clubs are, of course, one of the few public places where gay men can socialize freely with little fear of homophobic backlash. It is, however, the size and scale of a circuit party—in conjunction with the use of drugs—that seems to impart it with a capacity for inducing intra-personal enlightenment:

So I think spiritually—I think for some people it probably develops them—a lot faster than say if you were to meditate to get to know yourself. For me it's been a process for me to get to know myself and what kind of person I am and in terms of enlightenment it's been the most effective thing that has happened to me. (John)

That the circuit can lead to development and *enlightenment* is particularly apparent in Marc's tale. Marc admits that his first circuit like experience was one initially filled with anxiety—*anxiety about drug use, about his relationship with the men he was with, and the prospect of taking his shirt off in front of others*. In the narrative Marc and his partner construct, however, the circuit became a place in which he was able to express who he was:

Russell: Do you remember the time at which your shirt came off at that event?



Marc: Oh yeah. It was slow. I think I even remember the T-shirt I wore. It was a plain black T-shirt. The sleeves could roll up handily—so that was step one was rolling up of the sleeves. And then it was not until I was starting to sweat very heavily that it was actually too hot to wear the shirt that it came off. And I was surrounded at the time. I was sandwiched between two of Scott's friends.

Scott: He was sandwiched with his shirt on. I remember hugging him and he said "Oh, this is fantastic. I can't believe this." That was when he decided to let go. I hugged him. And that's when I said, "Just let go, don't even fight it. Just let the music go through you and enjoy the feeling." And then he finally let go. And he was just like "Oh..." And then he was comfortable.

Marc identifies that moment—where he *let go*—as a pivotal moment in his self-understanding:

A big part of it was not caring what other people thought about how I looked or about what I thought or what I felt. It was about enjoying how I was feeling and where I was and the music and the people around me and the sensations and everything. That was really the beginning of a level of honesty with myself that I had not been able to obtain before. (Marc).

In a position where one is able to remove or suspend intra-personal barriers—being able to *let go of what other people thought about how I looked or about what I thought or what I felt*—brings with it the possibility of enhanced interpersonal communication:

One thing is the trueness of the communication between the two of us. Sometimes it becomes a need so that we can be together. And even though there are thousands of people around us—at some point in the party there is nobody beside us. It's only the two of us. We talk, we hold, we look at each other, we kiss, we tell each other things that can be hurtful in other moments or just like that it's time to talk about something. And it just happens there and sometimes it's just a need, so there is trueness that happens there. (Scott)

The effect, in short, is a more thorough integration of the self in relation to the needs and interests of others—an integration that moves beyond what might be taking place between two individuals to include an integration within a broader community:

And I find that at the parties I'm free to be myself, free to express, free to share all your emotions—the drugs do make you feel more emotional—but you are free to share with friends you're with—your love, your care, and your feelings. Physically you can share and verbally you can share. (John)

That the circuit's role in letting go of *what other people thought* plays itself out in better inter-personal communication is particularly apparent as Marc finishes his narrative about his first circuit experience;

After I kinda got comfortable with that—you know the shirt came off and I wasn't so anxious anymore—I was able to open up now to the surroundings more and the people more and the group that I had been introduced to. And all of a sudden they were there. And the smiles were very different than what they had been before. And now it was very different. And now they were smiling for me and what I was going through. It was very welcoming, very welcoming and like a family. Just a wonderful feeling of warmth and so then it was not so much about what was going on internally, but about what was going on around me and with other people the music got started happening as well. (Marc)

For Marc, the opportunity to express who he was and how he felt—in an uninhibited way, *not caring what other people thought about how I look, or about what I thought or what I felt*—ushered in a whole new sense of self and a new sense of community. Thus, for Marc, his first circuit experience not only allowed him to get in touch with himself—breaking through internal barriers that prevented him from being himself, but it also allowed him to negotiate his way through the barriers of a larger gay community:

I was never really comfortable with myself and being gay or being out about being gay. I was never really overt about it. And then I'm in a roomful of half-naked men that are holding me and touching me. And it was not really necessarily sexual. I'd never really been in a room full of men who were grabbing and touching. And this is when I was introduced to this guy who was not having a great trip and needed somebody to take care of him. And he was kind of pawned off on me. I didn't really know what to do at first, but eventually I was just comfortable just holding him and dancing with him really close—and I'd never met him before in my life. And I do remember a great sense of becoming that night a giver and thinking about his needs probably more than my own. And I think that I was part of the community too—being able to give that comfort and that sense of welcome to somebody else as well. So really it was a lot of learning for me. First of all about allowing myself to be accepted and touched and held, and also doing that for somebody else as well. That was the first time. (Marc)

Here, through the circuit, not only was Marc able to come to terms with aspects about his sexuality that he was never really *comfortable with*, but he was also able to learn how to bring others into his life and begin constructing a sense of community—*I think that I was part of the community*.

The loss of intra-personal and inter-personal inhibitions made possible through the circuit leads, ultimately, to a more fully actualized way of living and being. In a sense then, the circuit represents a place where one's sexual identity is confirmed and healed from the ravages associated with living through homophobia. It is in Marc's assessment that we can best see how the circuit results in more fully actualized subjects:

And in that moment and in that space I felt so privileged to be who I was and to be with the people who I was with. To see such a spectacle put on *for* gay people was *remarkable*; that experience was remarkable. And I've had that experience of feeling privileged a number of times at other circuit events. And those run-ins with acceptance in the community have gotten better and better. Even to a point where the first time I can remember being proud of being gay, proud of being myself, and feeling really lucky to be who I was—like not wanting it at any other way, never wanting to be straight. I'd never thought like that about myself before. The first time I felt so blessed to be who I was, was something I experienced at a party.  
(Marc)

And for John, who grew up in medium sized prairie towns with little if any gay community and no confirmation of his desires or sense of self, the circuit was something that finally allowed him to feel good about who he was:

As gay men we're brought up all our lives thinking that there is something wrong with us. We're never taught how to have a gay relationship or how to be gay. We are not taught these things. No one tells you it's okay. Everyone tells you it's wrong, it's wrong, it's wrong. It's always something that we have to fight for or strive for within ourselves, within our families, in society. Sure we might be happy at some level, but I think circuit events are an outlet to forget about what society has conditioned us to think, and forget about what we learned since we were kids. So when you grow up there you always hide it, hide it, hide it, and then you come to this big event with 20,000 people and you don't have to hide it anymore. It's memorable because at a circuit party you see so many gay people all being happy about being gay, expressing themselves. And for me it was very comforting as someone who was still battling those issues. When you see people who are having no issues with it, no problem at all and are just having fun, well you just get right into it, you just feel so good about yourself. The outside world doesn't exist and we're here as a group of gay men being gay men having fun as gay men. (John)

John's conclusion—*The outside world doesn't exist and we're here as a group of gay men being gay men having fun as gay men*—ties neatly into Peter's final assessment about the circuit—it's about *forgetting the real world*.

The sense of community invoked by attendees is decidedly internal and inward looking. Unlike gay pride celebrations, the circuit does not model the gay community for outsiders and only in a very few cases does a circuit event find play among non-attendees. When it does this is either to problematize or to legitimate circuit events.<sup>2</sup> The uses of kinship metaphors invoke internal, private understandings of the circuit:

Circuit parties are private in a huge kind of way. They are private in the sense that only gay men do that. Only gay men have those kinds of gatherings where there's a sexual tension in the air, in the entire room. So that makes it very private, even if there are 5000 men in the same room. And there's a bit of privacy in the anonymous element too. (Frank)

Moreover, that attendees understand these events in terms of shared commonalities further suggests that these events are inward looking. Attendees are not interested in sharing these experiences with those who might not understand or care. As an inward looking event, the circuit is a kind of safe space; a point Peter is particularly clear about:

No straight people. I hate it. I had to go to straight bars my whole life—until I was 25 or whatever. And I'm gay now; this is how I want to be, I wanna be only in a gay environment, it's my choice to be in a gay environment. So I want this to be in a gay environment—I don't want any kinds of straights there. I just don't like straight people in my environment. I don't want them watching what we do. I don't really want them to share in it. To be part of the moment because it's a gay thing. I want it to be a gay thing. I want it to be gay. If I wanted to go to an event where anyone could go, fine then I would go there with that frame of mind and be cool with it. But when I'm going to a gay event, I want it to be 100% gay. They mostly never are of course there are some straight people there, but it just bugs me. (Peter)

I take this to mean that the circuit is, for many, about *forgetting the real world*, about an escape. The nature of this escape is, at one level, rather banal—a kind of get-away, a vacation, as a time to have fun and be entertained:

They are momentary escapes—you can forget about all your responsibilities, where you just go out and have fun. (Sam)

It's a place that you go to escape from everything else from real life and it is a fun weekend. It's another world. It's a fantasy world—it's a world where there are no problems, there are no issues. It is definitely an escape from reality because everything is so fantasy like—there is beautiful

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<sup>2</sup> Articles in the *Vancouver Sun*, *National Post* and *Globe and Mail* have all attended to various circuit events—highlighting the economic impact of a circuit party on a local community—particularly in terms of tourist dollars.

lighting, a beautiful setting, and beautiful people. It's an escape from reality, to have a good time, to get away from everyday life, and just party your ass off for a whole weekend. (Dale)

On a second level there is also a more serious aspect that ties back to the suggestion that the circuit is about *being in a gay space* away from challenges associated with living in a broader heterosexist world:

It can be an escape for people that are not openly gay. I mean for instance this week I met two gays who lead straight lives because of their jobs and where they live. They do not go out to gay bars because of their jobs. So for them it's probably an escape to do what they can do. So it is definitely an escape from normal life for a lot of people and probably they get their strength out of a week of partying and go home and go back to work for a few months and are thinking about nice memories. (Andy)

In conjunction with the way the circuit is framed in terms of kinship metaphors and sharing, the understanding of the circuit as an escape carries with it a series of very rich meanings. Escape implies safety, healing, rejuvenation, and freedom. As a getaway, from the real world, the circuit is a space of refuge, where attendees need only consider and fulfill their own needs and desires. The circuit is, in some sense, rejuvenating for those who may not have the opportunity to be *openly gay* in other aspects of their lives.

## Conclusion

At the centre of this chapter has been a consideration as to what a circuit party is “about”. Given the ethnographic starting point of my research, I turned to how attendees distinguish the circuit from other large-scale dance events or other venues where one might dance—raves or after-hours spaces. In definitional terms, attendees understand circuit parties to have a relatively unique constellation of organizational or technical details: size, length, number of events, a history and focus, type and quality of performance, something that is away from the everyday, involves a collection of related parties over the course of a weekend, and are of a certain size. More useful in charting out the social and experiential contours of the circuit—what a circuit is “about”—rests in a consideration of the understandings attendees have about who attends a circuit event and why they do so.

As Marc talked about his circuit experiences, and reflected on the first event he attended, he highlighted how the music he was hearing for the first time opened his eyes to not only a new style of music, but a new community who appreciated it.

And the other thing that was really different was a way of listening to music. Music has always been important to me but it was a different kind of music that I had never heard before. Not on radio and it was never in nightclubs. You didn't get it in record stores. It was all new and fresh and *not* Top 40. And it was like I was home, because I've always been an alternative guy. And all of a sudden it was a community people listening to the same kind of music and they were *loving* it. And it was stuff that I had never heard before. It was big heavy beats that were inside your body—that was something I'd never experienced before. So the music was really really important. (Marc)

It is not merely that the music is, in some sense, good. Attendees like Marc use music as a way of marking or bounding a community of like-minded listeners—*all of a sudden it was a community people listening to the same kind of music and they were loving it.*

Standing in line, I overheard one man, upon hearing the music, say to his partner: *Straight people would just never get this music.* In the context of this soundscape, attendees engage in one ostensibly overarching pursuit—in Dale's words, *they are all there to dance and to have a good time.* In the context of the celebratory atmosphere, sexual pleasures are part and parcel of this collective desire *to have a good time.* The pleasure brought about by the sound and feel of good music, dancing, and sexual play and pleasure are rounded off with the aid of recreational drugs. Not only do these drugs function to enhance this collective pursuit of having fun, but they also help mark attendees off from others.

What begins to emerge is that attendees understand and experience the circuit as a confirmatory celebration of a shared difference from a wider—mostly unarticulated—straighter world. Attendees experience the circuit as an inward-looking, rather than outward-looking, event where attendees can rest in the security of a collective or community that offers transparent acceptance. This becomes clearer in light of the desire to exclude (too many) straight people; the way in which attendees frame the circuit in kinship terms; the rendering of the circuit as a place where barriers might be lowered to confirm the self and others in their identity, thoughts, and feelings; and the articulation of

the circuit as a location in which the real world can be forgotten to allow for psychological and spiritual healing.

For attendees, the circuit is fundamentally a community event—a space to celebrate a set of shared experiences, use the euphoria of dance and drugs to make deeper, more authentic connections within the self and between others, and find one’s sense of self and community confirmed among relations that verge on kinship. With the assumption that attendees will be almost exclusively gay it becomes possible to begin arguing that for attendees the circuit is a way of differentiating themselves from a larger heterosexual order, a way of marking who one is, and more importantly, who one is not through dance. In short, the circuit is, for attendees, not only a means by which a sense of community or *bonding* is made possible through an intense bodily experience, but, more importantly, it is also a means by which a stigmatized identity—one which is not only gay, but also one that consumes drugs and engages in non-normative sexual expressions—is confirmed. Marc’s reflections on a circuit event sum this up neatly: *We’re so lucky to be gay.*

## A Look Forward

Drawing on my own experiences and those of interview subjects, I aimed to uncover what, in a sense, I understood to already exist: a series of emic understandings of the circuit. In doing this, my intent was two fold—create for the reader a sense of how attendees understand the circuit and give those interviewed as much voice as possible in a project that is clearly not theirs. While I stand by both of these goals, relying on emic understandings—indeed framing them *as* emic— involves a subtle positivist conceit that brings with it implications that are worth thinking about. Geertz (1973) writes,

The claim to attention of an ethnographic account does not rest on its author’s ability to capture primitive facts in faraway places and carry them home like a mask or a carving, but on the degree to which he is able to clarify what goes on in such places, to reduce the puzzlement—what manner of men are these?—to which unfamiliar acts emerging out of unknown backgrounds naturally give rise. (Geertz 1973: 16)

I am guilty of just such an exercise. In my desire to give voice and respect the tales and thoughts of those interviewed, I have, in effect, traveled *faraway* to a *gay space*, returned with native interpretations and presented them to the reader *like a mask or a carving*.

For Geertz, the analytical task is to do more than present facts (or interpretations as facts) and assume they will reveal the significance of *unfamiliar acts* and *unknown backgrounds*. The task is to figure out *what goes on in such places, to reduce the puzzlement* by offering an interpretation, the veracity of which the analyst measures against social science's attempt to make the lives of others meaningful. For Margery Wolf (1992) this task—Geertz's call to *reduce the puzzlement*—is at the centre of an ethnographer's responsibility. As with Geertz, the challenge, in Wolf's opinion, is to determine the veracity of the analyst's interpretation of "what the devil is going on" (Geertz 1973: 27). Unlike Geertz, however, Wolf encourages the ethnographer to reflect on the validity of an interpretation by considering how his or her own understandings and practices inform any interpretation.

In developing an interpretation of what the circuit means and giving the reader a sense of what the circuit is "about" much of my thinking has been informed by the question: "What is it that distinguishes the circuit from other similarly structured events?" In many respects, this is an innocuous question—but it belies a set of less than innocuous of preconceptions that are not immediately apparent. Foremost is the assumption that there is indeed something that I might find in the circuit—a characteristic, an idea, an understanding, or a practice—which, in the end, would help specify the circuit from other dance events or venues. As a beginning point, this question—or analytical approach—risks assuming that the ideas attendees offer speak for themselves—that they are, in some sense, "facts". On reflection, this preconception was less an effect of the "factual" or "objective" specificity of the circuit's nature than it was an effect of my position in relation to the circuit.

Being an insider has conspired, in several ways, to encourage me to begin analyzing the circuit in terms of the way attendees have presented it to me and, more importantly, how I have experienced it—as something unique, separate, and distinct. As an insider, as one who seeks out confirmatory pleasures among a community of like minded in the context of relative marginalization, these events have left me dazzled — *intoxicated, a bit delirious*. I am, as a result of a desire to find a community, aware—in intimate ways—of the special-ness the circuit can evoke. Like Peter, I don't want to see too many straight people at my parties. This specificity is something I understand at a



phenomenological level: illicit drug use generates a command and desire for secrecy and isolation while the effects of drugs and the physical exertion of prolonged dancing only strengthens any suggestion that the circuit is special, removed, unique. Moreover, I have become, in varying degrees, acquaintances—and friends—with those interviewed and those invested in the circuit experience. As much as I am a researcher, I am also now, at this point in my research, a friend to some. As I sift through my notes and interviews, I am conscious of the fact that I want to preserve the ideas these men have left me with—respect the fact that they experience the circuit in terms of a community, in terms of *bonding*, as something special. In more banal terms, I am deeply conscious of a desire on my part to do little to threaten these relationships, by ensuring that their lives and activities are not cast in what for many is a negative light.

In fact, I have been guilty of interrogating any outsider's critical assessment of the circuit—not in the interests of calling for rigorous research or commentary, but in an interest to dismiss these concerns. This is a dismissal grounded, quite simply, in bad faith. I have been guilty of scrutinizing health concerns about the relationship between unsafe sex and drug use or the effects of drug use on personality and biology in an effort to either undermine or to suggest that things are more complicated than those on the outside might suggest. I initially met calls for me to interrogate my status as an insider with resistance and frustration at what I read as the *presumption* that my position as an insider might lead to complications in how I chose to reduce the puzzlement. On another occasion, Taylor made the strong claim that the circuit privileges a particular aesthetic, arguing that *the look* is central to who is or is not valued. My reaction—recorded in my fieldnotes—is, in hindsight, embarrassing. I found myself using theoretical ruminations as a way of undermining or rationalizing Taylor's concerns:

Is it so clear cut? I'm thinking of Bourdieu's discussion about the differences between rules and regularity. I'm also thinking about Abu-Lughod's (1993) work in *Writing Against Culture* where she points out that categories don't work the way we think they do. That is, they don't work at all—that there's resistance, reversal, challenge, subversion, shifting, rejection, acceptance. Outright refusal. I was telling Taylor that a variety of body types circulate in the circuit—big ones, tall ones, fat ones, small ones. And he kept coming back with: "What does your position serve you? Why is it important to believe that idea?" And now, as I'm writing, I'm wondering why he needs (or anyone of us needs) to think

about this (or anything) in terms of a coherent set of rules. Why is it important for him to believe the “rule” that only pretty boys have fun at these events? What does thinking about these events in terms of such hard categories serve? I think I’m increasingly beginning to accept that these aesthetic hierarchies are not at all useful. Well not quite, but that they don’t operate as easily or as clearly as theory might suggest. And I’m just struck with what I told Dara when we were talking about Abu-Lughod last week or whenever it was. To talk about categories, about the possibilities of categories not working or working seems to assume that the thinker is in some sense outside. (Fieldnotes 2000)

What is worth noting here is not so much whether it is possible or appropriate to use Bourdieu or Abu-Lugod’s ideas in the way in which I did—although I believe in some sense it is. What is important is that I turned to these thinkers as a way of undermining and dismissing Taylor’s very real, justified—and despite being an outsider—accurate assessment of an aesthetic hierarchy. That the hierarchy does not operate as clearly as Taylor might assume is not to suggest that it does not work in that way at all. What is more telling is that I drew on these theoretical ruminations as a way of casting Taylor as an outsider.

In effect, a set of experiences which confirm the special-ness of the circuit, a legacy from the ethnographic turn—a desire to be respectful, to listen to the voices of those who are part of my research—and the process of becoming acquaintances and friends with those who make the circuit part of their world function to highlight and privilege the voices of insiders over others. The analytical implications are important. Relying too heavily on emic interpretations to construct the texture and contours of the circuit assumes and buttresses the notion that the circuit is, in some sense, distinct in its structures. What this, in effect, does is support the notion that any accurate analysis of the circuit could only occur within the terms of the insider. This position in effect represents a variation on a theme captured by the words of an attendee:

“You can’t explain this to anyone unless they’ve been here. I tried to tell my friends about this and it just didn’t work.” (Fieldnotes 1999)

In this, there is very little place for analytical or critical purchase—the views of an insider are likely to replicate what is experienced rather than critically interrogate what is experienced.

For Pierre Bourdieu, this is one of the major challenges associated with sociological research—one potentially exacerbated by my status as an insider. The sociologist is “saddled with the task of knowing an object—the social world—of which he is the product, in a way such that the problems that he raises about it and the concepts he uses have every chance of being the product of this object itself” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 235). A more careful—and honest—consideration involves paying closer attention to alternative views. At the end of this chapter, the question thus becomes: How do others, who are farther away from the pleasures of the circuit, understand and interpret the circuit? In the following chapter, I introduce these alternative—and at times competing—views as a means of developing some critical distance.

## *Chapter 3*

### *Alternatives and a Life Outside*

At the close of Chapter 2, I suggested that relying too closely on emic interpretations of the circuit limits the potential for critical purchase. The stories and interpretations of those with a positive investment in the circuit—those who find pleasure in the circuit experience—are likely to replicate the circuit experience rather than analyze that experience. I further suggested that critical purchase may lie in the interpretations offered by those who have less of a positive investment. The overlap between the circuit, sexual pursuit, drug use, and aesthetics has spawned a number of assessments that are critical of the circuit's role in the confirmation and deformation of gay men and gay men's communities. Some of these alternative interpretations demonize the circuit, casting it in a less-than-positive light while other critics' interpretations parallel attendees' assessments and interpretations. In this chapter, I follow up on this suggestion, exploring, on the one hand, the nature of these critical interpretations of the circuit and, on the other hand, the roles these interpretations might have in the development of some critical purchase for the interrogation of the circuit experience. By critical purchase, I mean a point from which to begin analysis, some means of stepping—even briefly and imperfectly—outside the circuit.

An inspection of these alternatives does not, however, offer much in the way of finding critical purchase. In point of fact, an examination of alternative interpretations begins to complicate the prospect of conducting a critical interpretation of the circuit by challenging the distinctions—and thus the border—between attendee and critic. Emic assessments and interpretations overlap and intersect with the assessments and interpretations offered by outsiders, suggesting that both sets of interpretations are, in effect, constitutive of the circuit experience. More importantly, assessments from both insiders and outsiders are, in very real senses, phenomenologically accurate—they emerge out of lived experience—and given my commitment to respect the voices of those interviewed and those who are part of “my” field, I am reluctant to prioritize either the discourse of outsiders or insiders. In short, there is little that is “outside” to the circuit experience for those with an investment—favourable or otherwise—in the circuit.

In the first portion of this chapter, I introduce alternative interpretations of the circuit as well as the responses attendees mount in light of competing interpretations. What emerges is a great deal of overlap between critics’ and attendees’ interpretations of the circuit—attendees are just as likely to mount the kinds of critiques developed by critics of the circuit. Moreover, the material and ideas developed by critics are just as likely to inform attendees’ assessments of the circuit as are attendees’ assessments of the circuit likely to inform critics’ interpretations. In particular, attendees’ interpretation of the circuit is very likely to rely on rigorous academic research on the circuit experience. There is, in short, little that can be used to differentiate the interpretations of the critic from that of the attendee, the insider from the outsider. In effect, all interpretations of the circuit—critics’, proponents’, or attendees’—are part of, are constituent of, the circuit experience. This overlap brings with it an important implication: the boundaries of the circuit threaten to expand, limiting points of critical purchase or distance. If all interpretations of the circuit are part of the circuit experience, then how might an analyst construct the tools or methods necessary for critical analysis? The effect is to exacerbate the problem introduced at the end of Chapter 2. There is a corollary to this suggestion: as an object of analysis, the circuit experience begins to expand beyond the confines of the circuit party proper. Thus, not only is the “circuit experience” quite large—encompassing attendees’ interpretations and critics’ interpretations—but the tools available for

interpreting the circuit in a critical manner are constrained. In the second part of this chapter, I introduce a factor that further complicates this lack of distinction. When attendees speak about the circuit, they do so in relation to several other institutions central to gay men's communities and identities. When those interviewed worked to make sense of their circuit experience, they frequently drew on experiences at gay or gay friendly gyms, bathhouses, and other dance venues. This overlap begins to further suggest that where the circuit begins and ends is difficult to determine.

### **On the Outside: Alternative Views**

The work and commentary of Michelangelo Signorile (1997) is probably the best exemplar of critical interpretations of the circuit. In *Life on the Outside: The Signorile Report on Gay Men: Sex, Drugs, Muscles and the Passages of Life*, Signorile (1997) begins his assessment by linking the circuit to what he calls the "cult of masculinity". Among gay men, he argues, the adoption of the hyper-masculinity associated with the circuit is a poorly executed reaction to a broader heterosexist community that reviles gay men. Gay male desire undermines and challenges the normative notions and organizations of what it means to be a man. For a man to desire another man is to risk emasculation and feminization. In response to this, Signorile (1997) notes that gay men pursue a rather conventional notion of masculinity—one premised on a hard, gym toned body. Speaking about the circuit, Bardella (2002) offers a similar assessment, noting that for gay men, the spectre of living with a failed masculinity is still, in many respects, a pressing problem. While in much of the urbanized West there has been a gradual and uneven melting of conventional gendered messages, these conventions are still very normative in their structure. "If the sex-gender system of 'metropolitan gay identity' has abandoned conventional notions of gender hierarchy such as those of the Latin American model, where manhood is associated with the dominant role, residues of a hostile ideology which conceptualizes femininity and passivity as inferior still haunt it" (Bardella 2002: 87). The hard-muscled, hyper masculine body has emerged as a response to the tension between being a man and sexually desiring men. With the aid of a gym membership and the right attitude, it is possible to desire men and still be and appear like a man. This is not a new assessment and others have argued that the gay men who choose the muscled body are attempting to buy legitimacy within a normative system of gender

relations. By embodying the ideas associated with masculinity gay men are, however, “in fact eroticising the very values of straight society that have tyrannized” the lives of gay men (Kleinberg 1987: 123, Lewis and Ross 1995a, 1995b).

In Signorile’s (1997) interpretation, the circuit is in fact responsible for the cult of masculinity among gay men:

The Evangelical Church of the Circuit is expanding and fuelling the cult of masculinity, as its values and ideologies continue to filter down to all of the gay world. Through its ever present advertising bombardment, through its dramatic impact on the bar and night club culture, through its explosive visibility in gay culture while so much else of gay life often remains less visible or completely invisible, the circuit will continue to promote...a never-ending cycle, which keeps the cult of masculinity firmly ensconced. (P. 131)

Signorile (1997) calls on circuit attendees to deprogram from this cult, arguing that anxieties about the buff body are hardly conducive to a positive sense of self and do little but confirm an already oppressive ideology which privileges men over women and a particularly normative configuration of sex, gender, and desire.

Signorile is also particularly sceptical about the oft-heard claim that the circuit has political ramifications. Organizers and some attendees argue that circuit events bring with them an enormous influx of tourist dollars for the hosting community and, by virtue of this, function to legitimate gay men’s social position. Organizers of the Black and Blue Festival claim that the dollar impact of the 1999 Black and Blue Ball generated 25 million dollars while the economic impact of the entire week long festival was 35 million dollars. It is on the basis of this fact that Sam was able to argue that, *obviously we have some political clout. Obviously we have somebody’s attention.* Indeed, various municipal and provincial politicians and representatives regularly include welcome letters to participants in brochures or program guides. Signorile (1997) is less sympathetic to this claim. While it is clear that gay men have *some political clout* if they are able to fill hotels, restaurants, bathhouses, and clubs during a circuit party weekend, he argues that the clout is rather constrained and is an effect of how and if one can participate in relations of consumption. The implication, for Signorile (1997), is fairly straightforward: if one does not have the income to spend while in hotels, restaurants, bathhouses, and clubs, then one’s *political clout* is likely to dry up.

Moreover, Signorile is also sceptical about any argument that circuit parties functions to promote community, friendship, or intimacy. For him, the events' structure—drug use, dancing, loud music, and the emphasis on appearance—leads to relationships premised on the pursuit of sex, relationships devoid of real intimacy. “For many, the circuit...provide[s] the perfect landscape in which to fulfill a desire for friendship, love, and closeness without getting involved” (p. 105). Signorile is not alone in this assessment. During our interview, Adam made a similar point:

The noise, the inability to communicate with others—this is a problem for meaningful communication—it doesn't allow people to get to know each other. (Adam)

Furthermore, Signorile does not share the notion that *forgetting about the real world* is beneficial. He argues the escapist nature of the circuit is just as likely to support the politics of the closet as it is to give gay men some breathing space. “The circuit, for these men, provides a secret life away from home, away from family, friends, and co-workers” (p. 104). In short, the circuit is no way to form friendship, community, and love. In fact, in light of the ways in which the sexualised nature of the circuit and drug use intersects, the circuit is more likely to be a place where gay men end up destroying friendship, community, and love because safer sex choices are difficult to make while under the influence of drugs. Signorile (1997) is particularly frustrated about the disregard attendees and promoters have for what are, to him, the obvious links between circuit parties, drug use, and HIV transmission. That many AIDS service organizations use circuit events as a means of generating funding revenue is a particularly contentious issue for Signorile. For an AIDS service organization to associate itself with a circuit event is hypocritical, contradictory, and self-defeating—circuit events, for Signorile (1997), actually promote unsafe sex by virtue of the links between sex, drug use, poor judgement, and HIV transmission.

More recent and rigorous research oriented toward public health makes similar interpretations and tells similar stories about the dangers associated with the circuit—particularly around the relationship between drug use, unsafe sex, and HIV seroconversion (Brown 2001; Colfax et al. 2001; Lewis and Ross 1995a, 1995b; Manserge et al. et al. 2001; Mattison 2001). Bardella (2002), drawing from Lewis and Ross (1995b) and others from within the gay press, has argued that sculpting the body



beautiful is about casting a form of AIDS magic—muscles are healthy, indicating that this body is not a host for AIDS or even using the body as some sort of talisman to protect one from HIV/AIDS. “When ‘circuit queens’ go the gym, they might be escaping the stigma of sexual deviance by attempting to identify with their oppressor but, and perhaps mainly, they are using their bodies as magical shield against internal menaces” (Bardella 2002: 88). Mattison et al. (2001) examined the demographics of circuit attendees and explored the relationship between drug use, unsafe sex, and the reasons for attending circuit events through self-administered surveys. They concluded “Multiple drug use [at circuit parties] is a particular concern and we believe...that a case can be made for increased research, including a focus on interventions to reduce both drug and sexual risk in the circuit party subpopulation of gay men” (p. 125). Manserge et al. et al. (2001), after examining similar issues through the use of a close-ended interview survey, paint a rather stark picture of the circuit and HIV transmission:

if we consider the large number of men who attend circuit parties, as well as the growing popularity of such parties, then the likelihood of transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases among party attendees and secondary partners becomes a real public health concern. (Manserge et al. 2001: 957)

Lewis and Ross (1995a, 1995b) adopted open-ended interviews to explore the relationship between beliefs and ideas associated with the gay dance party scene and HIV transmission as a means of establishing a fuller understanding of prevention possibilities. One of their major conclusions involves the argument that the symbol and belief systems associated with circuit events, particularly those associated with the cult of masculinity and the disinhibition arising from drug use, contribute to confusions and failures in negotiating safer sex among gay men. Overall, this research frames circuit events as sites of danger, suggesting that public health officials need to consider developing appropriate intervention and education strategies to help combat the spread of HIV infection.

### ***Responses and Reactions***

That there are critics with a less than positive assessment of the circuit is not to suggest that attendees are not capable or willing to mount the same kind of critique against the circuit. Attendees are, in fact, equally capable and willing to mount similarly structured critiques about the circuit, suggesting that any distinction between insider and

outsider is difficult to maintain. For example, Ben raises concerns about *the look*—or, in Signorile’s (1997) terms, the cult of masculinity:

It also gives you a drive or a desire to, in a narcissistic way, improve oneself because you are exposed to a tremendous number of incredible bodies. And that gives you a bit more drive sometimes to go to the gym and work out. Perhaps it’s not the right reason, but if it makes you feel better I don’t see much harm in that. As long as it is to a certain point. There are those of us who go past that, in terms of body enhancements, which I think is a bit much. It certainly can make one want to do that and could be a negative effect as well. (Ben)

John made a more focused argument, suggesting, like many, that taking the pursuit of a fit body and the circuit look to an extreme was not healthy:

I think that circuit parties have encouraged people who have never worked out to work out and look good and I guess if that’s part of their personal development then that’s good. If it’s the only part of their personal development then it’s not good. It’s good to be healthy, to look healthy, and to be healthy. I think a circuit party promotes that and puts that pressure on to look good. But it depends on the receiving end on how you accept that pressure and if you just accept it to look good and look pretty and nothing else, and not develop in any other way, then it’s pretty sad. But I think that if you are working out and want to look good and if you are also if you are concerned about developing yourself in other ways—not just physically—mentally, spiritually, or career-wise—then I don’t think it’s bad. I think everything works in sync with each other. (John)

Similarly, Dale pointed out that those using steroids—Ben’s *body enhancements*—just to get big for a circuit event were *taking it way too seriously*:

If somebody is taking steroids for the party, then I think they are taking the circuit party too seriously. It’s almost taking over your life. In the sense of you’re so worried about the party and what you look like but really, once you get there, they are so fucked up, nobody cares. At the beginning when you first enter they care, but you don’t remember who is there half the time. You should do it because you want to do it for yourself, but if you do it for the preparation for the function coming up, then you are giving the circuit party too much credit. At circuit parties, people look amazing and I want to look good too, but I want to look good 24/7, not just for the party, but for everywhere I go, everything I do. (Dale)

While hardly as focused as Signorile’s (1997) critique, Ben, John, and Dale are all willing to concede that the aesthetic hierarchy of the circuit is problematic in many regards.

When asked about negative reactions to his attendance at circuit events, Alex expressed frustration, noting that critics focus on the negative—*they don't see the camaraderie*:

Some people don't understand going to circuit parties. I think a lot of people who haven't participated and don't fit into the whole circuit scene have a lot of judgements about it—that it's superficial, that it's hedonistic, that it's shallow, that it means nothing, that it's drug-oriented, that it's all negative. They don't see any positives about it. They don't see the camaraderie. (Alex)

While it is not clear the degree to which attendees like Alex use these alternative assessments to think about the authenticity of the community relationships emerging from the shared circuit experience, it is clear that those interviewed were somewhat cautious when thinking about the depth of those relationships:

I think the circuit is a huge community. I've felt like I had an instant group of friends the last couple times I went to these things. I don't know if they are real friends or not. But in that situation we're all friends and there is a real sense of community there. I felt connected to so many of these people and if they had lived here I would have been friends with this group of people—I think. (Alex)

You have a real sense or feeling of belonging when you are there. How much you can take out of that I'm not sure, but there certainly have been connections made—so on that scale there is community being developed. But do you call that community or do you call that a relationship? That's one person. That's two people. But I think that's how you start to create that network or community if you want to call it that. But at the same time there are also people that we party with a lot but I can't remember their names. (Marc)

Ben, however, is not willing to dismiss these relationships as any less valuable—only that their value may be temporally bounded:

I don't think it's necessarily less valuable—it certainly is at that time good for the moment. And there are some friendships you do maintain. (Ben)

Marc—as are most attendees—is aware of the argument that relationships within the circuit are *shallow trappings*, devoid of real intimacy:

People who are not in the circuit scene think it's very surface and shallow and emotions aren't real and that kind of stuff. When I first saw this stuff I didn't understand it. I didn't get it. I saw surface. I didn't see friendships. I didn't see relationships. I didn't see value. I just saw skin and gym. So

what I was seeing was the shallow trappings of this sort of lifestyle and not really anything beyond that. (Marc)

For Marc, however, these assessments are based on a poor understanding of the circuit. Like Ben, he is able to imagine ways in which authentic relationships in the context of the circuit are possible. Thus while the extent, depth, or authenticity of the circuit community is debated, attendees do, in Scott's words, connect, touch, and *develop friendships*:

It's about feeling good, making everyone feel good, talking, and connecting. People communicate and touch and exchange and develop friendships that will probably last forever or at least a long time. (Scott)

Scott summarises: *We're definitely sharing something.*

Circuit attendees are also sensitive to the criticism that the circuit is about drugs or that the circuit promotes drug use. Indeed, at one level, to suggest that the circuit experience is *only* about drug-use, or simply an excuse to use drugs, would be untrue. The logistics of attending a circuit event are frequently complicated and expensive enough to throw into question the idea that attendees go to circuit events *only* to take drugs. Attendees do a great deal at circuit events that only tangentially—or not even—relate to drug-use. After asking Sam about his best circuit experiences, his response did not even index drug-use:

Gay Days was definitely fun this year. The most visually exciting was Montreal Black and Blue three years ago—if you are looking for visual stimulus. One of the most fun was New Orleans Hell Ball four years ago. The one's that are big but they seem small are usually the most fun. Where you can get a chance to actually meet some groups of friends from different place and you actually have a chance to maybe hang out, do some lunches, do a pool party, actually get to know some of them and later get to dance with them on the dance floor. I probably have the most fun at Whistler. We go with a group of friends from town and it's a chance to show off your own turf for a change. And Whistler is quite different from any other circuit event because it involves activities other than just the party. So you have a chance to—like in New Orleans—you have a chance to socialise with the people you are partying with as well so when you are actually dancing on the dance floor you've actually made closer connections than flirting with them right? You've had a chance to ski with them or board with them. (Sam)

What begins to emerge here is the suggestion that the pleasure of the circuit extends beyond any simple desire to use and experience the euphoria brought about by drugs.

This is not, in any way, to suggest that drugs do not figure into Sam's circuit experience. In fact, over the course of the past ten years, Sam has consumed more drugs than ever:

but I've sort of figured out what I like. Like for example, Special K is hallucinogenic, it screws up your spatial orientation. That was a drug I thought was cool for a while because it was like, "Whoa!" You get totally fucked up and you can get to go on the most bizarre trips and see things that you think were only meant for God to see. It can be actually a very moving experience. (Sam)

He is not, however, willing to let his drug experiences eclipse the party itself:

But being a sort of techno geek and stuff like that, well a lot of the stuff I like about a circuit party is how they put on the production. How did they put on the lighting? What sort of special effects are they doing? And if you're on Special K, forget it right? You're not going to be able to pay attention. So I prefer to be on something like ecstasy for the main part of the party so I'm social and so I get a real feel for what's happening at the party. (Sam)

Sam's interest and focus on a broader set of experiences that extend beyond mere drug-use suggests, I believe, that while drug-use is central to the circuit experience, the circuit does not represent an excuse to do drugs nor is it only about drugs.

As much as attendees experiment with drugs and their combination, they also experiment with the prospect of attending without drugs—with greater and lesser degrees of success and interest:

I have to admit that I don't enjoy going out without drugs as much. So then I prefer to stay home and not going out instead of go out and do nothing. (Andy)

I have not gone to one without chemicals since I discovered chemicals or the effects—however, I have modified my intake to some extent, depending on the event and what I have to do the next day. And since my first time my use has gone down. (Ben)

However, even those who are entirely committed to using drugs at circuit events, like Alex—who has *never been to a circuit party without* drugs—are able to imagine the possibility of having a great time without drugs:

I've never been to a circuit party without drugs, [but] I think even without drugs I would feel great going there. (Alex)

I think I could go without drugs and totally enjoy myself but I mean part of the fun is the touching and feeling—and part of the route to that is the drugs because people’s inhibitions are gone (Marc).

Others, however, are able to have a *great time*—drugs or no:

I have gone out without drugs—like last summer, I went out a few times without taking drugs and had a great time. (Frank)

I’ve since learned that Tom went to the Black and Blue and left relatively early at around 4:00 with a friend of his. Neither of them were stoned and both had a real good time. Tom was almost surprised: “I couldn’t believe how much fun we had and we weren’t stoned”. (Fieldnotes 1999)

Sam and Tom pointed out that they were more than able to attend an event without the use of drugs—usually because of work responsibilities shortly after the event:

Some people say they couldn’t do it at all. For me it’s not as much fun but it’s still fun. Everyone is like pushing me and I hate it [laughs]. And they are sweaty and I hate that and there are a lot of things I hate—that I don’t tolerate as much—but I’m still having fun. I love circuit music, house music, trance—so even if I can go and listen to a really good DJ that’s like a big high on its own. (Sam)

I’ve gone to some late-night things and not done anything. Like at local after-hours things, I just take a caffeine pill. It gives me the energy to keep going. It also reminds me of going to a bar without drinking—it’s a different picture. (Tom)

On the basis of these few excerpts, two possible interpretations about the relationship between drug-use and the circuit party emerge. On the one hand, we might understand the circuit and drug-use as two mutually exclusive aspects or issues that may or may not be added together, depending on one’s preference. If this were the case, then the degree of ambivalence with which attendees approach this question would be less pronounced. All seem to be willing to consider a circuit event without drugs—some even try doing so—but most seem to raise the question: what would be the point?

On the other hand, the relationship might be more conditional—as with Marc’s suggestion that drug-use *is what defines* the circuit experience:

These events would not happen if it were not for the drugs. There should be recognition that if it was just drinking then they wouldn’t happen. (Marc)

And yet, in the same breath, Marc conditions his statement, pointing out that

These events are not entirely about drugs but it's like, well, having a circuit party without the DJ wouldn't happen. And a circuit party without the lighting wouldn't happen. (Marc)

The suggestion here is that a circuit experience wouldn't happen without the drugs—but then a circuit party wouldn't happen if any of the other elements associated with a circuit party—the DJ, the lighting—were missing. Moreover, if the pleasures of the circuit *simply* followed as an effect of drug-use, then one might expect attendees' sense of pleasure to be more cut and dried than either Sam's, who is *still having fun* without the use of drugs and Tom's characterization of his experience without drugs as *different*.

While it appears that drug-use is central to the circuit experience, the relationship is much more nuanced and complex than either an additive or conditional model might suggest. The relationship is, I think, better characterized as being mutually constitutive. Thus, when Frank says drug-use *is part of the whole thing*, he is, I think, only partly correct. The experiences and effects brought upon by the drugs make up or produce the circuit experience, just as the circuit experience helps form and shape the effect of drugs and their experience. This is, of course, a truism of drug-use—drug-use does not happen in a social or experiential vacuum. But this link is, I think, even more complex than this; listening to circuit attendees speak about the circuit and drug use begins to suggest that there are “stops” along this mutually constitutive link.

The nature of these stops became particularly apparent in Scott's description of his first circuit experience—an encounter that was entirely drug free, with only the vaguest understanding that those around him had consumed drugs:

I remember going to Gay Pride in New York. And other than my immediate friends that I was with I had no idea what was going on drug wise in the rest of the party. But I was very extremely impressed by the parties. Especially Gay Pride in New York—like on the pier and the parade itself and then going to Roxy. And having those shows—it was, like, overwhelming. Like I remember on the pier there were 12,000 people. And the Village People were singing and a helicopter was flashing lights on them—and that was all part of the production. It was just overwhelming. For me I had no idea if there were any drugs. I was not even thinking about it. So my first time at something like a circuit party was before I knew anything about drugs or I was conscious about the drug culture. (Scott)

It was only at his second circuit experience that Scott was introduced to, and chose to attend an event with the aid of, drugs:

And then when I went back to Montreal and friends were telling me, “Oh, you have to go back to Black and Blue.” And I said, “Well what is it?” This was six years after it was happening. It was already very big. And they said “Well, it’s a party, it lasts all-night, it’s with 10,000 people.” And they told me that I could try ecstasy. (Scott)

In his recollection of this second experience, Scott emphasises what impressed him the first time he was *at something like a circuit party*—the production of the event:

Again it was an unbelievable experience. As soon as I stepped into the lobby, it was just like, “Oh My God.” There were all these things happening. There were these circus performers there, hanging from the ceiling, doing chiffon climbing. The lights were unbelievable, the staging, the décor, like *everything*. I was euphoric without taking any drugs already—*before* any drugs. And I was not even on the dance floor yet, I was just in the lobby. It was spectacular already and the party was not even started—already it was an amazing experience, a fantastic experience. (Scott)

This grandeur, the fantasy brought about by the production, was something he experienced and took pleasure in *without* the consumption of drugs:

I didn’t take my drugs until two o’clock in the morning—because I was scared; I was not sure if I was going to do them. But I was committed to trying—to myself and to my friends—so I did. And then there were some people around me that were kind of liking me—so they were touching me a little bit—but I was still very uncomfortable. I didn’t know them and I didn’t know what to do about that and I lost my friends, so the safety net was gone. So when I left at 7 o’clock, I didn’t get the real experience—the drug experience. Well I had it—like I had some sensation on skin and visually—but I didn’t really get the full treatment because I think, today, it was because I didn’t have the safety net around me. (Scott)

What becomes apparent in light of Scott’s comments is that the circuit event is more complicated than being simply—or only—about drugs or that these events are merely excuses to take drugs. As he assesses why he didn’t get *the real experience—the drug experience* what emerges is not so much the effect of the drugs as it is the effect of who he was with and how he was with them.

While the surrounding party was *unbelievable, spectacular, amazing, and fantastic*, it was lacking in some respect—and this lack does not appear to have much to do with drugs because he *had*, in fact, consumed the drugs. Lacking, in Scott’s



estimation, were interactions with friends. Note that he speaks about a commitment *to my friends* to try the drugs, complains that he *lost my friends*, and points out that *I didn't really get the full treatment because I think, today, it was because I didn't have the safety net around me*. As a result

I talked to my friends the next day [about not getting the full treatment] and they said, "Maybe you should try again and we'll take care of you?" And they did—and it was a totally different experience. So they took care of me and they were with me all night. And it was like, "Wow, this feels so good." And I thought to myself, "Now I got the experience." This time, I didn't have the party—it was just a regular after-hours event—it still was a huge room and it was 3000 people and it was unbelievable music—but it wasn't a real circuit party. But I did have the experience—suddenly everything changed—I let go—because there were people around me this time, people that I trusted, that were there making sure I was there to have fun. There were people rubbing my hand and touching me. Nothing sexual, just sensual. So that time it became a real [circuit] experience—my first real experience. (Scott)

For Scott it is clear that drugs played a role in his experience but not in any simple or direct way. In his first experience he was dazzled by the party—*overwhelmed*—without any recourse to drugs. His second experience involved drug-use, but it was not a particularly memorable experience—in fact, what was more memorable were the events that took place before he took his drugs and the fact that he did not have fun. What made his third experience memorable was not the effect of the drugs he took—in fact, he does not even mention the use of drugs when describing this *real experience*. What seems to set things apart for him is the presence of his friends.

For Scott, then,

Even though the drugs are there, present, I don't think they are necessarily essential to make a circuit party or a quality event. It's very present for sure—but I don't think it's essential. We have to admit that in those cases where you do not have fun—like my first time on drugs—there's no amount of drugs that will make it good enough. So that's why I said earlier that drugs are not essential. Sometimes it is the energy of the people, the crowd, and the room, where everything is enough for you to feel it. (Scott)

It is not just or only a drug-consuming crowd that make *a circuit party or a quality event*. There is more going on here than an additive or conditional relationship between drug-use and the circuit experience. Rather there appears to exist a mutually constitutive

relationship between the circuit and drug-use—with an important step along the way: *Sometimes it is the energy of the people, the crowd, and the room, where everything is enough for you to feel it.* For Scott, without the crowd, the people, the opportunity to be touched and interact with others *there's no amount of drugs that will make it good enough.* Thus while drugs and the circuit are part and parcel of the same experience they are an empty package without the people and the crowd.

Finally Bardella's (2002) and Lewis and Ross' (1995a, 1995b) suggestion that attendees' focus on *the look* represents a talisman against or through which HIV/AIDS and its effects are warded off is an idea that did not emerge very clearly among those interviewed. Of those interviewed, only Tom's views began to approach this interpretation:

I guess in the gay context the whole body beautiful and muscular thing is a backlash against wasting and the signs of AIDS. (Tom)

Andy offered a similar explanation when asked if he could account for what he understood as a distinctly North American masculinity:

When HIV came out in the 1980's, people started to take steroids and drugs to look better. And from that side on you see the whole development into the muscle scene. But when it came up in the Netherlands and also in Europe it was taken up by the government right away. Regan here neglected it and in the Netherlands it was right away an issue like cancer—something for health care. From that point of view people were also not interested to look better because they got medication and things like that. (Andy)

When I asked Alex if circuit events contributed to unsafe sex or HIV seroconversion, he, however, replied with a more strongly worded statement:

Wrong. That's just wrong. I don't think there's that much unsafe sex going on. Back when I think about me wanting to get fucked on the dance floor I brought a condom. Most people may say, "I wanna fuck you" or whatever and "I've got condoms back at my place." I've never had anyone say "I wanna bareback you Daddy" or "I wanna have unsafe sex with you." There's this whole thing about barebacking and I haven't seen it related to circuit parties. I have had unsafe sex recently, but it wasn't anything to do with a circuit party. It was just more stupidity on my part. At circuit parties, I don't think I had sex without condoms. I have had sex after circuit parties, but that was with condoms. (Alex)

Overall the way in which HIV figures into the circuit was particularly muted among those interviewed. Few, in fact, made much reference to the role of HIV/AIDS in relation to the circuit, even when asked directly. One interview subject working in gay men's health mentioned seroconversion as a concern in the context of circuit parties while one HIV positive respondent—Frank—did think about the circuit in terms of HIV.

Overall, circuit attendees are aware of the critical, alternative interpretations of the circuit, are able to mount these critiques themselves, and are able to propose responses to those less positively disposed to the circuit as they. Not unexpectedly, these reframings and responses circulate around a now familiar argument: the circuit is really about being with friends, being part of a larger gay community; it is a way of developing who one is and finding one's place among others. That the circuit experience is about community and security—that it has some sort of functional or adaptive aspect, given the generally hostile context of many gay men's lives—is also an interpretation that emerges from more academically and oriented research. Thus, Lewis and Ross (1995a) make a similar claim:

The dance party scene serves an important social and personal function for a significant subset of...young gay men. The benefits are numerous and are enjoyed not only by those gay men who attend the dance parties, but also by the larger gay community. The dance parties afforded many gay men the opportunity to witness, and celebrate their own survival and that of other members of their community over the HIV pandemic. The dance party milieu also provided many gay men with a satisfactory alternative social structure and enhanced a sense of pride in belonging to a minority group. (P. 65).

Bardella's (2002) analysis of the circuit falls within similar—although more theoretically elaborated—terrain. He frames the circuit in terms of a quasi-religious experience, what he calls a pilgrimage of the plagued. In light of the fact that gay men have been most hard hit by the AIDS pandemic, and in light of the neglect gay men faced from a larger hostile homophobic context, a need for rituals of mourning and loss developed. For Bardella (2001), the circuit event represents such a response:

The transformed environments created within these institutions—with the use of lights, music, sets, special effects, costumes, crowds and drugs—contribute to the feeling of suspended reality and allow for the temporary abandonment of everyday inhibitory constraints. The gay 'dance-drug' culture can provide opportunities for the achievement of physical and

spiritual ecstasy as well as positive reaffirmation of self-identity and (sub)cultural values, articulated through sexual behaviour and consumption of mind altering substances. (P. 91)

Bollen (1994) makes a related claim, arguing that the gay mega dance party scene represents a means of affirming a gay community through a transgressive politics. Speaking of the Sleaze Ball held in Sydney, Australia, he writes “In the rehearsal of homosexuality’s transgressivity, in the celebration of that power-infused position as excluded Other, the difference of lesbian and gay identities is reaffirmed” (p. 185). In short, these interpretations suggest that the dance space allows the gay community to frame and understand who they are by violating and transgressing the norms of a broader heterosexual community.

### **Schematizing Interpretations**

On the basis of the material outlined in Chapter 2, the alternative interpretations offered by critics, and the responses circuit attendees mount in reaction to these critics, it is clear that what the circuit means is complex and contradictory. The question becomes: How do we think about these alternative views? Despite their complexity, critics’ interpretations centre on a fairly stable set of core issues: the role the circuit plays in the (de)formation<sup>3</sup> of gay community and identity, particularly around exclusion on the basis of the look and the relationship between drug use and HIV transmission. In obvious ways, these interpretations are not merely alternatives; they are competing moralizing discourses about what the circuit and circuit attendance means.

On the one hand are those who, like Signorile (1997), argue that circuit goers have little critical understanding of the links between the circuit, normative notions of masculinity, self-esteem, drug-use, and unsafe sex. Signorile argues that the circuit is fraught with danger and functions to perpetuate a normative notion of masculinity, promotes the use of drugs, increases the risks of HIV transmission, is profoundly apolitical, and morally bankrupt. Others, like Mattison (2001) and those with interests in gay men’s health and public health more generally, are less condemnatory, but still see

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<sup>3</sup> I adopt the notation “(de)formation” as a means of resisting any inclination on the part of myself or the reader to prioritize the confirmatory/positive aspects of the circuit over any negative effects the circuit might pose for community and identity. This is a debate I wish to avoid and by holding this debate constant, other issues or aspects of the circuit begin to emerge.

the circuit as a site of danger in need of intervention. At the very least, these critics understand the circuit experience as something in need of serious reconsideration. On the other hand are those who suggest that the circuit is functional. It represents a reaction to a broader hostile or homophobic world and provides a space in which gay men can explore and develop community relations. Some—particularly attendees—go so far as suggesting that by embracing what the circuit means, gay men might, in some sense, become fuller, more actualised subjects, as is evidenced from this quote from *Circuit Noize* magazine: “Insight, breakthroughs, healing and a range of spiritual experiences are inherent in this form of ritual dance. In rediscovering our dancing body as the vehicle and container of joy and the experience of love and unlimited creativity, we are reclaiming our full humanness, our expanded capacity to hold high levels of energy while remaining conscious, aware, and present” (Maris 2000: 39; cf. Chapter 2).

A standard analytical response to these competing discourses might involve a consideration of the accuracy of these interpretations. Does the circuit experience generate genuine authentic notions of community? Are the links between the circuit experience, drug use, and HIV transmission merely associations or are they causal? The former question is one I doubt can be answered, while the latter question is one that current research into risk and sexual practice does not, in my opinion, answer well. An alternative strategy might involve exploring how one discourse “produces” an alternative discourse. This particular path has been followed by Southgate and Hopwood (1999) in their account of resistance and pleasure around the demand of illicit drugs in the context of the Sleaze Ball in Sydney, Australia. They write, “The individual and collective pleasures born of dancing on drugs at clubs and large-scale events such as dance parties generated subjugated knowledges used to construct discourses which contested the position that illicit drug use was a deviant activity” (p. 305). Neither of these analytical approaches is particularly appealing insofar as each involves an implicit prioritization of one moralizing discourse over the other. Assessments of whether or not the circuit contributes to community formation or whether or not the circuit contributes to HIV seroconversion rely on the assumption that either the proponents or the critics have, in some fashion, “got it wrong.” I argue, however, that both moralizing discourses are, in a very real sense, “true” insofar as each emerges out of how subjects—critics and

proponents—live and experience the circuit. Differently, all of these interpretations have a phenomenological, experiential, basis that must, at some level, be respected. If I wish to engage with those interviewed and those encountered during my fieldwork in a responsible manner, it is incumbent upon me to respect the stories I have heard. As a result, I believe it would be analytically careless to prioritize either of the discourses.

A similar issue emerges if we consider the sources of these moralizing discourses as well as the way in which they circulate. Concerns and commentary about exclusion and the look and/or the relationship between drug use and HIV transmission are to be found not only in the voices of attendees, but also in the pages of gay and mainstream press. Signorile (1997) is, in fact, a well known journalist within the mainstream gay press—writing columns for both *The Advocate* and *Out Magazine*. Moreover, just as often as not, calls for reconsidering or banning circuit parties are based on academic research. Newspaper articles and television news clips claiming that “Gay ‘Circuit Parties’ May Spread AIDS” (Plante 2001a) or “Health Officials Warn about Gay ‘Circuit Parties’” (Plante 2001b) or “Study links circuit parties to drugs, unsafe, sex” (Dotinga 2001) are all given a degree of legitimate gloss by virtue of the fact that they are based on science. Not unexpectedly, attendees are quick to mount responses to these critiques in the form of editorials, articles in the gay press, discussion on websites and email listserves, and through conversations with other attendees. For example, claims that circuit attendees’ narcissistic self-absorption leads to low voter turn out made by the San Diego Gay and Lesbian Times was met with a flurry of responses on a circuit party email listserve and produced a letter to the editor.

The intersection between academic research and circuit attendees’ interpretations also occurs in the context of health fairs and summits that have become part of the circuit, as well as through harm reduction material distributed at events. In 2001 I presented aspects of my own research beside Dr. Andrew Mattison (2001)—who had recently finished and published his research on the circuit and HIV transmission in the *Journal of Substance Abuse*—at the 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Party Health Summit, hosted by the Black and Blue Festival. In the audience were event promoters and producers, civil authorities, attendees, physicians, harm reduction advocates, and health workers. Significantly, membership in these categories was, in no sense, mutually exclusive. While Andrew

Mattison pointed out that he didn't attend circuit parties, in the audience were promoters who attended events, harm reduction advocates who attended circuit events, and physicians who attended the events. Moreover, attendees are just as likely to read and review original academic research about the circuit. Eric Rofe's *Dry Bones Breath* (1998) is an analysis of the current manifestation of the AIDS crisis among gay men in the West—particularly North America—and in it he takes to task the scapegoating of the circuit party crowd. His relatively sympathetic reading of the circuit experience and gay men's experience more generally has been presented at a variety of gay men's health conferences and circulates among gay men as well as party attendees. One of my interview subjects—Frank—had read *A Select Body: The Gay Dance Party Subculture and the HIV/AIDS Pandemic* written by Lewis and Ross (1995b) and used it as a way of framing his experiences to me during our interview.

When it comes to thinking about the circuit experience, this suggests that any distinction between scientific analysis of the circuit, popular accounts of the circuit, and the experience itself is hard to maintain. Clearly all of these aspects fold into each other. While it is true research constructed under the auspices of the scientific method is more rigorous than what one might find in the gay press and certainly more scholarly than the voices of party boys, the truth of the matter is that all of these sources have a role in constructing the circuit experience. To think that Frank did not use the work of Lewis and Ross (1995b) to make sense of his own experience—and what he presented to me during our interview—would be false. After my presentation at the Party Health Summit in Montreal, I had dinner with a group of men where a large part of the conversation circulated around drug use, harm reduction, safer sex, and HIV transmission. It is not unreasonable to assume that similar conversations occurred among others who attended the health summit. In short, the interpretations and understandings that emerge from this intersection of personal experience, popular commentary, and scientific research constitutes—in the sense of “to be the elements of”—the circuit experience.

It is thus not only difficult to prioritize either of the moralizing discourses, but it is also difficult to prioritize the sources from which they emerge. For this reason I am reluctant to privilege academic or scientific research on the circuit over the voices of either those who engaged in my research or more popular accounts and analyses of the

circuit. A significant consequence follows: this entire body of moralizing discourse—arguments and sources—represents data *as well as* methods and approaches that an analyst might use to think about the circuit experience. It is at this point that the problem introduced at the end of Chapter 2 becomes exacerbated. Treating all interpretations of the circuit as part of the circuit experience—including academic research—seriously hampers the theoretical and methodological tools that might create the critical edge needed for analysis, insofar as data and the analytical tools used to frame this data emerge from the same level of reality. Analysis necessarily involves and requires, at some level, critical distance and a critical lens—a means of stepping outside what is given.

### **Gyms, Baths, and Bars**

From the argument that there is little with which to differentiate an outsider's interpretation from an insider's interpretation follows a corollary: the circuit, as an object of analysis, begins to grow and expand beyond the confines of the circuit party proper. Thus not only is it difficult to determine where the circuit experience begins and ends, but the circuit, as an object of analysis, threatens to expand quite considerably. Further complicating this growth is an overlap or parallel between aspects of the circuit and other institutions characteristic of gay men's cultures in North America. In particular, those interviewed spoke about their circuit experiences in light of, in relation to, or through their experiences with gay or gay-friendly gyms, bathhouse experiences, as well as reflections on their experiences at dance clubs or after-hours venues. Without exception, when interview subjects were talking about the circuit and their circuit experiences, all shifted their discussions across these venues to make their points and arguments: bathhouses, comments about the gym, speaking about circuit events at the gym, references to after-hours events, and commentary about smaller dance events all made it into their assessments of the circuit and the circuit experience.

Certainly not all attendees have gym memberships—nor do all those who attend gay or gay friendly gyms attend circuit events—but the degree to which those interviewed made reference to the gym while speaking about their circuit experiences is noteworthy. The link—and thus some of the overlap—between the circuit and the gym is



relatively straightforward. The gym represents one of the major means through which an attendee can achieve *the look*:

Part of it is I work my ass off at the gym to look good. I know at these parties there are going to be other guys who look good. I wanna see them. I wanna know that they want me. A big part of it is reflection of that I fit in and that...I think a big part of it is getting affirmation for me and getting attention. (Alex)

It also gives you a drive or a desire to—in a narcissistic way—improve oneself because you are exposed to a tremendous number of incredible bodies. And that gives you a bit more drive sometimes to go to the gym and work out. (Ben)

Dale suggests that the link functions as part of a lifestyle uniting the circuit and the gym.

When I asked him to elaborate on what he meant by lifestyle, he replied:

The lifestyle where you train at the gym, where you work out hard, where you try to get bigger so you can attend the next party with your friends. It makes you harder to be more fit, because you want to fit in and you want to look good. And it motivates you to do that it definitely motivates you to work harder because there's a party coming up and you want to go, it motivates you to work harder. (Dale)

Dale's interpretation of the relationship between the circuit and the gym is functional and relatively straightforward: one goes to the gym to purchase a body because one goes to circuit parties. This functional link is not, however, the only way in which attendees used the gym as they framed their circuit experience: attendees do not speak about the gym only as it relates to attaining the look.

Quite simply, as attendees spoke about their circuit experiences and the gym came up as a point of reference, it was not merely in terms of *a drive or a desire to—in a narcissistic way—improve oneself*. Rather the gym represented a location through which attendees understood and spoke about their circuit experience. For example, as Dale constructs a narrative about the prospect of people bragging about their attendance at a circuit event, the location in which he imagines—or perhaps remembers—the events is the gym:

But people here at home usually don't even know I go to circuit events and they say "You should have been to this party." And I go to myself, "Oh, it's the same thing, it's the same music. What's the big deal?" I've done that to people when they come to the gym they brag about it. (Dale)

Similarly, Tom notes that at his gym, conversations about the circuit are part and parcel of the socializing which may occur between gym-members, while Alex points out that a large number of those who attend the circuit also spend time at a gym:

Especially at my gym, you find that the people that definitely go to circuit events are usually talking about them afterwards. (Tom)

The people that go to the circuit party are—most people—there's a huge percentage of the people that go to the circuit party that go to the gym. (Alex)

When I asked what he thought the boundaries of the circuit community were, Ben used his gym experiences as a way of supporting his assessment:

I think it's a real community, because you see a similar group of people who go to a circuit party go to a gay gym. (Ben)

Craig, in commenting on the exclusion attendees may experience, also references the gym in passing:

But you see sometimes people, [pause] they're so afraid of being rejected because they're not part of the group. You know, I don't look like you. I don't, you know what I'm saying? I don't act like you. I don't go to the same gym as you. I don't wear the same clothes. I can't find the same clothes to fit me like they fit you. So I'm just not a part of it. (Craig)

Attendees consistently spoke about the gym as they tried to make sense of their circuit experiences, touching on the act of going to the gym, of needing to go to the gym, and of talking about circuit events at the gym, and seeing advertisements of circuit and circuit-like events at the gym.

When asked about the similarities between the circuit and the gym, both Alex and Ben were able to make a number of parallels:

A very similar experience actually. I mean the drugs are different—there's no drug you are taking when you go, but the whole body thing is there, everybody is cruising everybody at the gym and there's the chance of sex in the shower room or the steam room or sauna. There's the camaraderie, the friendship, the working out replaces the dance. It can be like a dance in a way. It's very interesting actually. They are very similar if you're going to a gay gym there's not much difference between that and a circuit party. Except the drugs. (Alex)

There are a lot of similarities. Similarities in terms of the conformity in terms of the look, the masculine ideal or the body image there is similarities in terms of people going because it's a bit of a cruise session,

and it's to see if they can meet somebody and have sex. There are differences in terms of who you will see and some chemicals used at both—most people won't go to the gym on e, k etc, but you will still see sometimes steroids. A large group of people that go to circuit parties go to gay gyms so you see similarities in terms of individuals. There are a lot of similarities—gay gyms will also play the same style of music. So there are some differences, but a lot of similarities (Ben)

For both Alex and Ben, the similarities between the circuit and a gay (friendly) gym are structured quite closely along Andy's comments about the crowd, the idea, and the look and Peter's elaboration of his motivation. Except for the drugs and dancing, one can find *the whole body thing, friendship, the chance of sex, the crowd, and the music*. That the gym has a social and sexual function is something Lee, in recollections from the late 1980s, makes particularly clear:

The gym became a new venue to meet people, and to cruise, and to have sex. It had the music, it had the cute guys, but it was an all day kind of thing. You didn't have to wait till Saturday night. They all had steam rooms. They all had showers. And in some of the gyms that was almost more important than working out. I had some friends work out for 10 minutes and be at the gym for two hours. (Lee)

A related plank of many gay men's socializing involves the bathhouse—a relatively unique institution among gay men's communities that has been the site of more and less controversy since the emergence of the AIDS pandemic. As an institution, the bathhouse represents a relatively safe place for some gay men to meet, socialize, and find sex. Like the topic of gyms, circuit attendees raise the topic of bathhouses as they make sense of and describe their circuit experiences. There is, of course, the most obvious connection—and thus a point of overlap—between the circuit and bathhouses. For example, for Bill, Frank, Sam, and Andy, attending a bathhouse is a means to round out and finish a weekend of heavy partying. Given the sexual play witnessed and experienced on a dance floor, a bathhouse becomes a particularly appealing and straightforward means of releasing or exploring any erotic tension or build-up:

Sometimes you know one of the things we often do after a Friday or Saturday night out dancing would be on Sunday night we gonna go to the bathhouse. That would be our way of closing our weekend. (Bill)

I mean people go from a circuit party to the bathhouse, but that's because they get so worked up at a circuit party. After a circuit party I could go out and have sex. (Sam)

Here the link between the circuit and the baths rests on the fact that the circuit represents an impetus to go to a bathhouse. As with the gym, bathhouses also represented a means or location through which attendees made sense of the circuit. Thus, to reduce the relationship between the circuit and baths to a functional one—one goes to the baths because one is *so worked up*—would obscure the subtleties of the overlap between the two sites.

When asked to consider how or if circuit parties held any resemblance to bathhouses, some of those interviewed were willing to draw similar parallels. For Alex, while there is obviously more of an emphasis on dancing at a circuit event, both the circuit and bathhouses have a strong sexual component:

I think there's more dancing, definitely, at the circuit party, but that goes without saying. There's the same sexuality I think, at both places. Because if I think about it, almost at every circuit party I go to I take somebody to the bathroom for sex, almost three or four times at a party. I'm always taking somebody somewhere to have sex or playing with someone's dick on the dance floor. So I mean, the circuit is very sexual. And the tubs are very sexual. Obviously I have more sex at the tubs than when I'm at a circuit party. Yeah, they all have similar elements. A circuit party is more about dancing and the tubs are more about hard core sex. But the circuit party is also about hard core sex. (Alex)

That a circuit party is *more about dancing* also emerges in Andy's comparison, as he notes that while sex at a bathhouse is a virtual guarantee, going to a circuit event is:

more of a night out and see what happens— I think that a lot of people like to have sex but for me, at a circuit party it doesn't mean that sex has to happen. People are high and they don't want to be by themselves and when it comes to things like sex, sometimes it's not even happening because of the drugs. You begin fooling around and you can't get a hard-on and you end up talking. And a bathhouse is very like, pick up, go in a cabin, do your job, take a shower, do the next thing. A bathhouse, well maybe it's too direct you go there and two hours later you are outside and you came three times and you're satisfied for that moment. (Andy)

While Ben differentiates the circuit and bathhouses in terms of intent, he, like Alex, notes that an interest in sex is not absent from his circuit attendance:

For me, going to a bathhouse is basically looking for sex although I can't say that's not a significant component of going to a circuit event. It's just not always the reason for going and to me sex is the only reason perhaps to go to a bathhouse. (Ben)

Marc's assessments of the bathhouse create a degree of overlap as well:

I think there is a sense of belonging and community and it's OK to be yourself in a bathhouse. And to be sexual, which I think is also part of the circuit party, but I think that is probably where it ends. You don't really have a sense of family—I don't think—in the bathhouse. Maybe just acceptance would be there. (Marc)

Note that both touch on belonging and community, two of the aspects that are central to how the bulk of attendees articulated the nature of the circuit.

Others, however, were less willing to draw any parallels between the circuit and bathhouses. Ben and Dale, for example, note that the centrality of *the look* is less predominant at a bathhouse:

I think perhaps there's a little more—or a lot more—variety at a bathhouse. You won't have as much of the uniformity or the body beautiful look. And going to a bathhouse you basically have a place or location to do to have sex. I've never been one to do anything on the dance floor and there are very few places right there—and at a bathhouse if you want sex, you can have it right there. So I think the biggest difference is purpose which is 50-50 in a circuit party and variety and the ability to do something right there. There's much more emphasis on specifically sex in a bathhouse and much more emphasis on look at circuit party. (Ben)

For most, the distinction between the baths and the circuit revolved around the fact that entering a bathhouse indicated a clear willingness and desire for sex, while attending a circuit party did not necessarily signal or mean an interest in sex:

There are some people who are not there [at a circuit event] for sex. They are there for a good time; they are there to party with their friends. The sex part comes later not at the beginning whereas at a bathhouse it is straight up. (Dale)

I think of the mentality of going into the bathhouse is that there is no point standing there and giving attitude at the bathhouse. You are there because you're interesting in meeting somebody. You may find that whoever is giving you the attention is not someone you're interested in. But you are there for sex. And at a circuit party that assumption can't be made. I think a lot of people are there for a lot of other reasons but it leans toward a sexual attraction. At the baths—that's why anyone would be there, the only reason why anyone would be there. You can't pretend that you just dropped in to listen to the music. Getting off is more the baths and at a circuit party and somebody can show you that they think you are attractive by simply putting their hand on your shoulder for a bit and

giving you a smile or just giving you a smile. There's a spectrum but it's nothing like the bathhouse — it's about getting off. (Tom)

Both Scott and Sam are similarly reluctant to draw any parallels between the circuit and bathhouses:

For me you go to a circuit party and it's more for the friendship and, camaraderie and the sensuality and the bathhouse to be pure sex. (Scott)

For me I think the bathhouse is completely different. A bathhouse is about going and having sex for me—if I was to go to a bathhouse it would be just to get my rocks off. (Sam)

Yet, even as Sam argues that bathhouses and the circuit are *completely different*, what is noteworthy is that this is a difference in kind rather than degree:

At a bathhouse sex is the core and there are other things happening. And at the circuit party—it's not the dance, but the togetherness that is the core. All the other things are secondary—the sex, the meeting people and stuff. But in the bathhouse sex is more the core and all the other things are secondary. I mean people go from a circuit party to the bathhouse but that's because they are so worked up at a circuit party. (Sam)

Certainly sex is not *the* focus at a circuit event, and there are fewer places to have sex at circuit events than at, say a bathhouse, but this does not stop Alex or Peter from engaging in sex at circuit events. Moreover, that some events—particularly Sydney's Sleaze Ball and New York's Black Ball—create venues and spaces for sex begins to undermine any arguments that sex is secondary to the circuit. Alex, in fact, attended the Black Party with the intent of having sex on the dance floor. That the circuit has a *core* would suggest that it also has a periphery. Thus, while a pursuit of sex is secondary to the pleasures of dancing at a circuit party, sex is not absent from the circuit. And while the *other things happening* at a bathhouse—besides sex—is something Sam leaves to the imagination, his comparison suggests these *other things* may indeed be *togetherness and meeting people*. The nature of these *other things* is particularly clear if we recall Frank's assessment:

There's also something that I find really attractive about it and that's I felt the same way when I discovered bathhouses, and gay bars and all that kind of stuff is that it's a distinctly male space. To be around other gay men, and there's a real bonding that goes with that. That element to me I have to say is extremely attractive. I love that, even if you're there with guys twice the size of you, half the size of you, it doesn't make any difference. It's the fact that they're all gay men together in a big room. I love that bonding element of it. (Frank)

For Frank, the baths, like the circuit, are *distinctly male spaces* that afford gay men a chance to bond with each other. Note here that as Frank links the circuit and bathhouses, he says nothing about sex—the overlap is obviously more subtle than the pursuit of sex.

Indeed, my experiences at bathhouses have involved conversations and references to the circuit which suggest that the overlap or relationship between the two is more complex than any functional link might suggest. This became particularly apparent to me as my first visit to a bathhouse unfolded.<sup>4</sup> This first trip required, on the part of those who wanted to take me, a fair bit of convincing—I was nervous about what to expect. As a means of familiarizing the experience for me, the man I went with made the observation: *It's all the same people who you go out and dance with*. It is also worth noting that I had met one of the men who suggested we go “to the tubs” at a circuit event the weekend previous to this little adventure. I might also note that while research interests were not the sole motivation for going, this comment piqued my curiosity—I suspected as much and was interested in seeing how this idea played out as a lived experience.

After we paid our admission, got our towels, found our rooms and lockers, and changed into our towels, my “host” took me on a quick tour of the place—something that gave me a chance to get comfortable with the surroundings. We ended up spending much of the early part of our evening near the pool, where my host introduced me to a few people who turned out to be acquaintances of his. This interaction was, in so many respects, rather banal: a handful of men sitting around on deck chairs bantering about a wide range of small-talk topics. One that surfaced now and again was the circuit party where I and my host had just met and why some—who were not present this night—chose not to attend. At one level, some might interpret this coincidence as an effect of the fact that my host attended circuit parties and, in all likelihood, so too did some of his friends and acquaintance. Encounters later in the evening—unconnected to who my host might have been—suggest otherwise. By the pool, I had the luxury of meeting another man, who I later learned, had “just discovered” the party scene in the past couple of years. In our ensuing conversation, I learned that his experiences on the circuit had given

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<sup>4</sup> I would, as a methodological sidebar, note that I am not the first ethnographer to find himself doing research on and in gay bathhouses (Bolton 1995, 1996).

him an opportunity to explore who he was. I also learned that we had, over the course of the past year, been at the same parties—although, of course, not meeting. Incidentally, my host recognised this same man from the previous weekend’s circuit events.

Much later that evening, on my way out, I had the fortune to meet a second man, who convinced me to stay for a “while longer”. After, laying on the small foam pad that passes as a bed in most bathhouses, I found us—quite to my surprise—engaging in the sort of intimate and honest conversation that emerges after sexual exploration. Not only was this conversation tender—it certainly involved the bonding Frank sees as central to the circuit and the baths—but I found this bathhouse experience imbricated with the circuit:

We got around to the standard questions about what we did. He was sort of retired or between jobs right now. Had just got out of a long term relationship and wanted to get away from the ghettos where he said “he spent most of his life”—so he moved here. He seemed genuinely interested in my research and this was as good as any a time to gather data. He was quick to say I could use what he said for the purposes of my work. I took advantage of the situation and asked him how or if things had changed—given where he’s lived—New York, San Francisco and now here—and the fact that he was a bit older. He ended up focusing on his Fire Island experience first. “It’s beautiful and very sexual, but it’s always been very sexual. But you can take that or not if you want. But before it was more of a community, now it’s time shares for a week or a weekend and it ends up being all these different people at different times—it’s so much more fractured and fragmented. There’s also so much more of a ‘looking-for-the-next-best-thing’ kind of deal going on. And there’s so much judgement and separation going on. Everyone is always looking out for the better body or the nicer dick. Or at least that’s my experience. I can remember being out one night and heard and saw a couple of guys point to another guy and say ‘look at the fat boy dance.’” (Fieldnotes 2001, Barry)

Here, in a bathhouse, Barry began talking about one of the more obvious and negative aspects of the circuit experience—exclusions and boundary marking on the basis of *the look*. In terms of his commentary about his circuit experience, Barry’s discussion circulates around New York’s Fire Island—a gay travel destination near New York. Fire Island is home to the Morning Party—a relatively well known circuit event. At the time, I assumed that Barry was referring to the Morning Party, although in hindsight I realise



that I cannot be sure—although Lee’s comment about the same holiday destination help to confirm this assumption:

The first party that I sort of consider a circuit party that I went to after The Saint closed was on Fire Island. It could have been 84 or 85—somewhere in the mid-eighties—that I had a sense that people were planning for it, that they knew it was coming, that it was a light on the horizon. (Lee)

The comments Barry made in closing his observations suggest that, at the very least, his experiences with other social spaces represented a means to think about the circuit. He finished by saying:

At Salvation in Miami, there’s the VIP line and then the regular line for all the people from the boroughs—just the normal kind of people. And then there are the pretty types who go up to the door man—and they all know him—and they go in before these normal people from the boroughs. I make it a point of not doing that, not trying to be better than them. It’s just not nice. (Fieldnotes 2001)

Importantly, Barry’s elaboration on the circuit began to wander away from the circuit party proper. The important point here is that in my discussion with Barry about the circuit—how he feels it has changed over the years—Barry easily moved from a discussion of circuit events—presumably Fire Island’s Morning Party—to Salvation, a large dance club in Miami. And while Salvation is a very large club that attracts a circuit clientele, it is still very much a dance club and not a circuit party.

The overlap between the circuit and bar or club-like venues is also apparent in light of Brian’s experiences. Wanting to make sure that they paced themselves and were able to enjoy the entire weekend’s roster of circuit events, Brian and a few friends decided against going to one of the scheduled parties and opted instead for an early night at a “regular bar”:

It was just a bar—it was maybe like 750 people. And I was excited about going because I thought I’d get to meet some locals instead of all the tourists from out of town. And it was—it was mostly local guys. And it wasn’t a big and buff crowd either—mostly drinkers it seemed. There were two levels—a downstairs more cruisey area that had some sort of leather dress code and the upstairs dance area that was tiered so you could look down on to the dance floor. The music was okay—and it was fun—but it was more like a bar atmosphere. And then it turned into a circuit party just like that [snaps his fingers]. Things changed in an instant: things went from being just a bar to being a circuit experience. They played a

song by Deborah Cox—and that was the buzz—that Deborah Cox was going to be performing on Sunday—and shot bubbles and lasers out above the crowd and things went nuts. The energy level went “Boom” and hands were in the air and people were together. It just turned into a circuit party. It was magical. (Fieldnotes 2001, Brian)

Here in this regular bar, all the elements that we might associate with a circuit event were either absent or present in only the most tangential way—with a local DJ, no entertainment and a small—less than a thousand people—crowd. Certainly what goes a long way in accounting for the fact that the *energy level went “Boom” and hands were in the air and people were together* was the fact that those in attendance were cued to the parties coming up as well as to the crowd that filled the bar. In Brian’s words, *everybody was on the edge of party mode*:

It was like everybody was on the edge of party mode—this was Friday night, the beginning of the weekend and everyone was trying to figure out if they were going to go all out now or save it for the next couple of nights—and I think everyone decided that things were going to be set off right now. (Fieldnotes 2001)

That *everyone was on the edge of party mode* does not, however, undermine the argument I suggest here—that the circuit and the bar experience overlap to some degree. This parallel also emerges through some of Marc’s comments. Earlier, I drew on Marc’s suggestion that the circuit is about sharing the energy that emerges out of the interplay between attendees, DJ, and music—he noted that *I think that energy travels around the room*, and summarized by saying *maybe that’s a part of what makes it a circuit party*. What is noteworthy for the purposes at hand is the conclusion that followed this summarising statement. He stated, *well you could get that at an after-hours club too if you tried*.

Attendees experience, understand, and explain the circuit in ways that are not limited to the circuit itself. They frame and explore their understandings through and in the context of the gym, bathhouses, bars, and after-hours events—suggesting that the link between these three institutions is less functional and more overlapping than one might initially assume. My first experience at a bathhouse certainly had little to do with being *worked up*—happening as it did a week after the event at which I met my host. Moreover, being *worked up* was not part of the conversations of which I was a part. Rather, these conversations involved reflections on who attended and what the circuit

meant, suggesting that there is more in common here than a gateway from one location to the next. That both of the men I had sex with made—coincidentally?—the circuit part of their lives in some respect further suggests that there is more to the relationship between the circuit and the baths than a simple functional link suggests.

This is by no means an attempt to argue for any neat or one-to-one correspondence between circuit events, gyms, and bathhouses. Attendees do not attend the gym merely to *improve oneself because you are exposed to a tremendous number of incredible bodies* at a circuit event or go to bathhouses simply *because they get so worked up at a circuit party*. This is merely to suggest that there are, in Ben's assessment, *a lot of cross-connections*:

Well, the people that go to gay gyms often go to circuit events. Circuit event people go to a gym or a gay gym or a gay friendly gym more than a straight gym. Some of those same people will go to bathhouses, but not always. And there is just a cross connectivity. Because one goes to the gym to look good to go to the circuit. One goes to the circuit if one goes to the gym to look good. Will do the same chemicals to enhance our look for the circuit etc. etc. There are a lot of cross-connections there. I don't think one necessarily begets the other. But I think they support and reinforce each other. (Ben)

The connection between circuit events and nightclubs/after-hours venues—particularly large gay dance clubs or gay nights at otherwise straight clubs—is also more complex than any functional link might suggest. Attendees' use of clubs and club experiences extends beyond a desire to replicate the circuit experience on those occasions when they are unable to attend a circuit event. Club experiences are also mechanisms attendees use to help think through the circuit experience. In speaking about the circuit, Marc used an experience with a night club to help frame how he worked through his feelings about *the look*:

I wasn't confident in myself at all physically. We had had an experience many years before in a bar in Los Angeles—and it was a bar—it was a big bar. But it was a bunch of the beefy beautiful men with no shirts. And it actually disgusted me at the time. I thought it was shallow and pointless and I thought, "Don't these people have a life? What do they do for a living? Do they live in a gym?" And I just couldn't see any reason for it. And it was very uncomfortable for me. And I think it was partly about me not feeling comfortable with my sexuality and I think it was body image as well. And on that occasion there was no way I was going to take my

shirt off. They were huge beautiful man and I just didn't want to do that. Now, I hear from people who are not in the circuit scene that they think the circuit is very surface and shallow and the emotions aren't real and that kind of stuff. And I think that there probably can be certainly a lot of that going on, but at the same time it's so easy to talk to people and make friends and actually take those relationships outside of it. So I think it can play both ways. In Los Angeles I didn't understand that. I didn't get it. I saw surface. I didn't see friendships. I didn't see relationships. I didn't see value. I just saw skin and gym. So what I was seeing was the shallow trappings of this sort of lifestyle and not really anything beyond that.  
(Marc)

What is important here is that while Marc is speaking about his understanding of the circuit and what it means—particularly the challenge he faced in negotiating through what he initially understood as a shallow emphasis on the body and looks—he is doing so through an experience he had at a large gay dance club in Los Angeles.

The circuit, gyms, bathhouses, and night clubs are obviously separate discrete events or locations. In many respects they are mutually exclusive—to be in one location is not to be in one of the other locations—and attendees will be very clear about the boundaries between these events. However, as much as the circuit is about confirming a gay identity and community, so too are these institutions. Even the most casual glance at the interactions at gay or gay friendly gyms, bathhouses, and nightclubs would suggest that, like the circuit, they serve to confirm a sense of self and a community. Like the bar or the bathhouse, the circuit also emerges from—and is embedded in—a set of historical struggles and social conditions associated with the “birth” of homosexuality. There is a very large body of gay history identifying the links between the emergence of a homosexual identity in the West with shifts in urbanisation and capitalism and an oppressive interpretation of same sex behaviour articulated through Judeo-Christian morality and the emerging field of medicine (for example see D’Emilio 1983; Greenberg 1988; Ross and Rapp 1997; Weeks 1977, 1991). Briefly, the labelling of those who engaged in same sex behaviour as deviant functioned to produce a distinct consciousness and identity for those so labelled. In light of conflicting and ever present forms of discrimination, this cultural complex was fractured at its inception.

The challenges associated with race, gender, age, ability, and class have produced a complex cultural group that is highly varied, producing a proliferation of identifications that are more or less closely associated with a same sex desire. The broader context of

capitalism, globalization, and increasingly communications technologies, has further complicated the nature of this community through a commodification of homosexuality, such that, in many respects, a gay identity is one that is purchased through the market. Out of this interplay between desire, constraint, and the limitations and possibilities created through race, gender, class, and ability emerges what might be understood, very broadly, as the field of gay desire. I understand the circuit as a sub-field—one among many—embedded in this larger arrangement. Gay men regularly speak of bar culture and bar bunnies, the baths, gym culture and gym bunnies, leather culture and leather men, the drag community and drag queens, the phone lines, outdoorsy types, and scene/non-scene guys, to name only a few.

In thinking about the relationship between the circuit and a wider gay community, Peter framed it this way:

It's a different kind of community. Like with the gay community, there're some people that like to party and some that don't. Or there are people that like curling and some that don't. Or like hockey or whatever. The gay thing is the centre and then there are these orbits around it.

Peter's comments function to confirm that the circuit is one means among many for securing a sense of place or self as a gay man. Clearly the circuit does afford—at a phenomenological level at the very least—some gay men with a sense of place and a confirmation of who they are as gay men. In no way do I wish to deny this.

Yet, Peter's suggestion—a common enough one—does not offer much in the way of *specifying* the circuit. When attendees frame the circuit as a means of confirming a gay identity and reaffirming a gay community, they interpret the circuit in functional terms. This is to say, that in their imagination and experience, the circuit leads to, or produces, something: community, a desire for sex, a will to go to the gym. Significantly, however, the functional aspects of the circuit overlap with a number of other gay men's institutions. For gay men in urban settings in the West, and particularly North America, gay or gay-friendly gyms, bathhouses, and bars/dance venues all represent institutions through which identity and community are created and maintained. Moreover, these sites, like the circuit, are regularly at the centre of debates concerning degree to which they help contribute to the (de)formation of gay men's communities and identities. Closures of bathhouses in the mid- and late-eighties, their subsequent re-openings, negative

assessments of “gym bunnies”, and the rejection of nightlife as meaningful all suggest that these sites are, at the very least, contested (Buckland 2002). In short, there seems to be little that functionally differentiates the circuit from other sites of identity and community confirmation.

Any numbers of festivals or celebrations function, in general, in a similar manner and there are more than enough sites within gay men’s urban cultures which help confirm identity and community. In these terms, any number of sites share structural and functional similarities with the circuit experience. Thus, not only are the boundaries between the circuit and other major institutions in gay men’s culture in North America somewhat nebulous, but the circuit appears, in many senses, to be one institution among many responsible for confirming or deforming community and identity formation. All are part and parcel of how gay men come to understand how they are and how they relate to each other. This overlap between the experience of the circuit and other institutions germane to gay men’s cultures brings with it an important methodological question about the boundaries of the circuit: where does it begin and end? In effect, the preceding analysis only serves to exacerbate the challenge that emerged at the close of Chapter 2.

## **Conclusion**

In reflection, the conclusion drawn at the close of Chapter 2 is an effect of two related interests. The first was a desire to construct for the reader a sense of what the circuit was “about” in both descriptive and analytical terms. The second was a commitment to give the voices of those interviewed and those with whom I engaged during my fieldwork as much play as possible in a project that is, in many ways, not their own. What emerged was a discussion of the circuit based primarily on emic interpretations and assessments—the story I told was, to a large degree, the story of insiders. Relying on emic interpretations is productive as a means of giving attendees voice, but doing so also brings with it analytical constraints. In particular an emic analysis is likely to reproduce arguments and ideas germane to insiders, limiting the opportunity for thinking about the circuit in a critical or novel manner. The circuit means particular things to those invested in it, and these meanings necessarily determine the structure of any debate about the circuit.

Emerging from this is an important analytical implication: relying on emic interpretations of the circuit functions to constrain the points of purchase on which one might mount a critical analysis. This is neither to suggest that emic interpretations are either inaccurate or somehow wrong nor is this an attempt to engage in debates about false consciousness. I do not think of circuit attendees as cultural dupes who do not understand or are incapable of reflecting on their experiences. I merely wish to argue that emic interpretations are bound to reflect vested interests and the perspectives afforded by social position. As a result, emic interpretations are something the analyst needs to handle with attention.

In this chapter I explored alternative interpretations with the intention of using them to establish some critical purchase from which to analyze the circuit. The goal was to find a point of reference or vantage point that would not necessarily replicate the interpretations and ideas of those who do the circuit—in effect, to find some means of stepping, even imperfectly, outside the circuit experience. A close consideration of the details of these competing interpretations suggests, however, that any distinction between emic interpretation and alternative interpretations is hard to maintain. Insiders' assessments overlap and intersect with the alternative assessments and interpretations offered by outsiders, suggesting both sets of interpretations are, in effect, constitutive of the circuit experience. In short, there is little that is outside the circuit for those with an investment in the circuit and what it means. As attendees, activists interested in gay men's health and communities, and academic researchers engage with the circuit—and with each other—the interpretations they offer are all, in a real sense, insider's interpretations. I am reluctant to prioritize any of these interpretations because they all emerge out of a lived experience or engagement with the circuit. Two rather significant implications emerge. First, the scope of the circuit as an object of analysis becomes quite broad. All moralizing discourse—as well as the sources from which these interpretations emerge--fall within the scope of the circuit "experience." Second, in light of the fact that scientific analyses become part of this interpretive matrix, the analytical tools and approaches conventionally used for the purposes of critical analysis are somewhat suspect.

The work of Colfax et al. (2001), Lewis and Ross (1995a, 1995b), Mattison (2001), and Manserge et al. (2001) draw on techniques of survey research, in-depth interviews, and ethnographic participation as a means of analyzing what the circuit means and what attendance at a circuit event implies for gay men and gay men's communities. At the same time, Bollen (1994) and Bardella (2002)—and to a somewhat lesser extent the work of Colfax et al. (2001), Lewis and Ross (1995a, 1995b), Mattison (2001), and Manserge et al. (2001)—draw on relatively sophisticated theoretical tools and methods as a means of interpreting the circuit. While these analyses are certainly more scholarly than the ideas that circulate on a dance floor, the ideas they proffer play off the terms of a relatively familiar typology that constructs the circuit as either being about the confirmation or the deformation of gay community and identity. As a result, relying on these researchers' ideas and conceptual frameworks as spring boards for thinking about the circuit risks reproducing the debates in which they are already grounded. At the same time, however, those invested in the circuit have every experiential reason to have the interpretations they have. In light of a commitment to treat the voices of those invested in the circuit with respect and in light of the argument that there is very little "outside" the circuit, the question still remains: What does critical purchase look like? In the following chapter, I turn to the work of Pierre Bourdieu as a means of thinking about this question.



# Chapter 4

## *“Flaunting the Body”*

### **Introduction**

In many respects, the challenge that emerges in Chapters 2 and 3 is a struggle with what Bourdieu calls the “preconstructed object”. For Bourdieu, many of the “objects” we receive before us and on which we focus our interpretive and analytical energies—scientific or otherwise—have boundaries whose existence is an effect of our social position. “Social science is always prone to receive from the social world it studies the issues that it poses about that world. Each society, at each moment, elaborates a body of social problems taken to be legitimate, worthy of being debated, and of being made public and sometimes officialised and, in a sense, guaranteed by the state” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 236). Given that sociologists are necessarily embedded in their object of study, the sociologist is “saddled with the task of knowing an object—the social world—of which he is the product, in a way such that the problems that he raises about it and the concepts he uses have every chance of being the product of this object itself” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 235). Insofar as the analysis remains within the terms of the debate at hand, achieving critical distance is hindered. It is an inherently conservative—or in Bourdieu’s terms, a “doxic”—move: “it leaves the crucial operations of scientific construction—the choice of the problem, the elaboration of concepts and analytical

categories to the social world as it is, to the established order, and thus it fulfills, if only by default, a quintessentially conservative function of ratification of the doxa” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 246).

For Bourdieu then, any characterization of the social world is necessarily situated—socially, politically, and economically. This situatedness

produces a discourse which *states little more than the site it comes from*, because it sweeps aside what is essential, namely, the field of struggles, the system of objective relations within which positions and postures are defined relationally and which governs even those struggles aimed at transforming it. (Bourdieu 1984: 156, emphasis added)

The claim Bourdieu is making is subtle, but all the more important for its subtlety. The way the analyst frames an object of analysis *qua* object of analysis—where it begins and ends, what it means, the questions that are worth asking of the object, and the modes of asking these questions—are not necessarily determined by the nature of that object or site. Rather, a broader field of struggles and power relations informs—if determines is too strong a word—the “positions and postures” the analyst and others have toward an object or site. Moreover, not only does this system of relations define the postures and positions but also the struggle to refine, reform, or analyse the object itself. It is only through reference to this broader field of struggles or relations which defines the analyst’s “positions and postures” that one can understand what Bourdieu identifies as the “true” object of analysis. To suggest that social reality is interpretable only by reference to these struggles is to claim that the “real is relational” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 232).

This is precisely the challenge that emerges when it is recognized that attendees’, popular journalists’, and academics’ interpretations of the circuit are imbricated in such a way as to be one arena of experience. The “choice of the problem”—the topics and issues around which competing and alternative interpretations circulate—is a product of the relations in and through which the “object” is situated and constructed. To accept or use the “concepts and analytical categories” guiding these interpretations is to accept the problem as presented and produced by an already established order. My point is this: the interpretations of the circuit—as either boon or benefit, as either constructing and confirming community or deforming and destroying community—and the means by

which they are analyzed—experiential, through the concerns of journalists and activists, or through the rigours of scientific research—are effects of a broader field of struggle. These interpretations state “little more than the site” they come from and, as such, represent a kind of trap: one is limited to thinking about the object as it is presented to us by the social world (Bourdieu 1984: 156).

My insider status—what Bourdieu calls first hand knowledge—exacerbates the problem of the preconstructed object. First hand knowledge generates a “whole series of supremely naïve questions [...] because they immediately ‘come to the mind’” of one who wonders about himself or herself” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 231). When Peter said *Honey that’s why you do this with friends*, it struck a chord in my desire to find or construct a sense of community. Questions about community inform many aspects of my engagement with the circuit—academic or otherwise. Indeed this thesis represents an attempt to figure out how and if the circuit is about community. Thus it is not too surprising that the same concerns about community and identity confirmation emerged as I analytically engaged with the circuit and interview subjects. Listening to the voices of insiders—mine included—highlighted, produced, and helped confirm the notion that community and identity (de)formation were at the centre of the circuit experience. As a member of a relatively marginalized community, I am not unique in this way and it is not unusual that other gay men interested in gay men’s communities and gay men’s’ health would raise similar questions about the authenticity of the relationships formed through the circuit or wish to monitor the relationship between gay men’s health and the circuit. Indeed, concerns about community and health are all things that naturally “‘come to the mind’” of one who wonders about himself or herself” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 231). It is thus not surprising to see the start of a body of research assessing the degree to which the circuit contributes to the affirmation of community and identity (Bardella 2002; Colfax et al. 2001; Lewis and Ross 1995a, 1995b; Manserge et al. 2001; Mattison et al. 2001; Signorile 1997).

If, however, Bourdieu is correct, and the “real is relational”, then this entire approach to the circuit and the body of analysis it gives rise to—academic or otherwise—misses the point. “If it is indeed true that the real is relational, then it is possible that I know nothing of an institution about which I think I know everything, since it is nothing

outside of its relations to the whole” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 232). The truth of the circuit as an institution—as a thing—is to be found not in processes of community and identity (de)formation. Any truth that emerges from an analysis conducted at this level is based on a preconstructed object made visible to the analyst by virtue of his and his informant’s social position—positions and postures defined by a field of struggles. If the real is relational, then the truth of the circuit is to be found through a consideration of “the network of relations of opposition and competition which link it to the whole set of institutions” associated with gay men’s communities and the larger relations of power that contextualize and make these communities possible (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 232). The challenge I am mounting for myself—and anyone interested in the circuit—is significant: think about the circuit in ways that bring the analyst outside the circuit party proper, identifying how it, and the analyst, are situated in relation to a broader field of social relations and struggles that make the circuit possible and “worthy of being debated” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 236).

### **Breaking with the Preconstructed Object**

To be relatively free from the social relations and struggle which determine the preconstructed object—to use a broader field of objective social relations as a point of reference or vantage point—Bourdieu argues that the analyst must endeavour to *actively* construct the object of analysis rather than passively accept what the social world presents to the analyst. Thus, the “first and most pressing scientific priority [...] would be *to take as one’s object the social world of construction of the preconstructed object*” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 229, original emphasis). For Bourdieu this “requires first and foremost a break with common sense, that is, with representations shared by all, whether they be the mere commonplaces of ordinary existence or official representations, often inscribed in institutions and thus present both in the objectivity of social organizations and in the minds of their participants” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 235). Elsewhere he speaks of “bracketing of ordinary preconstructions and of the principles ordinarily at work in the elaboration of these constructions, [which] often presupposes a rupture with modes of thinking, concepts, and methods that have every appearance of common sense, of ordinary sense, and of good scientific sense” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 251).

As a means of avoiding being “trapped” within the object Bourdieu starts with the assumption that social reality is not “an object facing a subject”. To do so “is the means of submitting to scientific scrutiny everything that makes the doxic experience of the world possible, that is, not only the preconstructed representation of this world but also the cognitive schemata that underlie the construction of this image” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 247). It is for the purposes of avoiding the trap of the preconstructed object that Bourdieu applies the notion of “field”. He writes,

the notion of the field functions as a conceptual shorthand of a mode of construction of the object that will command, or orient, all the practical choices of research [...]. [I]t tells me that I must, at every stage, make sure that the object I have given myself is not enmeshed in a network of relations that assigns its most distinctive properties. The field reminds us of the first precept of method, that which requires us to resist by all means available our primary inclination to think the social world in a substantialist manner.” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 228)

As a conceptual tool, the field represents a means to resist thinking in substantialist or realist terms—it prevents the analyst from thinking of the object as a bounded “thing” and encourages an understanding of the social world in *relational* terms. The challenge, however, is that social spaces “can be grasped only in the form of distributions of properties among individuals or concrete institutions” which regularly leads to a “regression of the ‘reality’ of preconstructed social units” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 230). In our engagement with the world, we regularly, indeed almost always, interact with things—people or institutions—that we experience as objects. The notion that the person or institution in front of us is grounded in a set of invisible social relations is difficult to reconcile with an object’s “thing-ness”.

The difficulty in constructing and thinking the circuit experience in relational terms is that such an approach goes against the grain of everyday experience. For those invested in the circuit, thinking about the circuit in relational terms is a less interesting proposition because it means thinking about the circuit in terms that are not directly—that is to say phenomenologically—“about” the circuit. Concerns about community and identity (de)formation—qualities of a thing called the circuit—are germane to those invested in the circuit. Moreover, given my commitment to the voices of attendees, I feel compelled to privilege the problems, concerns, and interpretations attendees raise. The

challenge is to speak about and respect the concerns of those invested—positively or not—in the circuit from a point of reference that does not necessarily grant these preconstructed concerns an ontologically privileged position. This point of reference is a broader field of power relations which makes these concerns possible and sensible. “Only by reference to the space [...] which defines [interpretations] and which they seek to maintain or redefine, can one understand the strategies, individual or collective, spontaneous or organized, which are aimed at conserving, transforming or transforming so as to conserve” those interpretations (Bourdieu 1984: 156).

While the analytical tool box Bourdieu uses to break with “common sense”, “ordinary sense”, and “good scientific sense” defies any easy compartmentalization, he does offer two concrete strategies (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 251). On the one hand he suggests interrogating the collective work that goes into the construction of a preconstructed object. On the other hand, he argues for a careful comparison of the object of analysis under consideration with other related objects. Both strategies are designed to bring the analyst to see and understand his or her object in relational terms. In the following sections, I apply these strategies to various aspects of the circuit. In the first section, I consider some of the collective work that has gone into the preconstruction of the circuit as a thing that is about or contributes to community and identity (de)formation. The interpretations of critics and proponents of the circuit—their collective work—is built on a modern understanding of the relationship between agency, structure, and the body—a conceptualization which the circuit, in fact, brings into question. This modern conceptualization—one that glosses over puzzles of embodiment and the body in favour of a relatively rational self on the way to explaining agency—is problematic when it comes to thinking about the circuit in critical or novel manners. In particular, this conceptualization of the subject limits any debate about the circuit to a consideration of individual will or structural constraints. The circuit is understood as a thing that shapes the subject or a thing through which the subject may be able to negotiate on his way to practice. I close this first section by suggesting that attending to bodily experience and pleasure may help shift the register through which concerns about community and identity (de)formation are understood.

In the second section, I continue to explore the centrality of bodily experience within the circuit, outlining how my own first-hand knowledge worked against understanding the centrality of the body in favour of concerns about community and identity (de)formation. In the final section, I reflect on the implications this active construction of the circuit has for thinking about the circuit. On the one hand, it is obvious that the circuit experience is about community and identity (de)formation—that is, the circuit is fundamentally about a struggle for social recognition on the part of attendees. On the other hand, emerging as equally—if not more—significant than concerns about community and identity (de)formation is the way bodily experience is intimately connected to this struggle for recognition. The object of analysis that emerges through an active construction is no longer *merely* about community and identity (de)formation. Rather the point of inquiry—the puzzle—is much broader and more complex. What emerges as salient, as “analytically relevant”, is the way the body and bodily experience and the broader field of relations which makes this bodily experience worth the struggle intersect.

### **“...*The Emergence of these Problems...*”**

Bourdieu writes, “To avoid becoming the object of the problems that you take as your object, you must retrace the history of the *emergence* of these problems, of their progressive constitution, i.e., of the collective work, oftentimes accomplished through competition and struggle, that proved necessary to make such and such an issue to be known and recognised as *legitimate problems*, problems that are avowable, publishable, public, official” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 238). Doing so will enable one to “discover that the problem that ordinary positivism (which is the first inclination of every researcher) takes for granted has been *socially produced, in and by a collective work of construction of social reality*” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 239, emphasis added). The texture of a social problem not only has origins within the struggles of a particular social field. It also has origins in the social fields that contextualize and butt up against any particular field. As a product of collective work, the “preconstructed representation” and “cognitive schemata that underlie” the representation of the circuit as a site fraught with dangers or potentials that may or may not be negotiated successfully have their origins in

a wide variety of intersecting and overlapping social relations as fields (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 247).

Thus, competing interpretations about the role of the circuit in community and identity (de)formation must be understood in relation to the history of the AIDS pandemic and the development of an HIV/AIDS industry. As a field of social relations, the HIV/AIDS industry is not only a set of institutions through which individuals are cared for but also a set of relations through which individuals can and do build careers and status. To colonize the lives of circuit attendees with survey instruments and ethnographic observations is a means of securing accolades within fields of academic and journalistic interest and reward. Signorile's (1997), Colfax's et al. (2001), Mattison's et al. (2001), and Lewis and Ross' (1995a, 1995b) invocation of the spectre of HIV and AIDS is not an entirely altruistic endeavour. These authors and commentators are invested in constructing the circuit in a particular way because doing so is productive for them. Indeed, if I am honest, my own activities are equally suspect. That I was able to garner funding for research about gay men only by framing the circuit in terms of HIV transmission has much to say about the doxic approach currently guiding our understanding of gay men's communities. This speaks volumes about how the state understands gay men's communities and health primarily in diseased terms, despite the fact that we currently live in what Rofes (1998) calls a post-AIDS world, where HIV for gay men in the West is no longer the same experience as the crisis it was in the late eighties and early nineties.

Thus, interpretations of the circuit as bane or boon are as much an effect of the logic of the circuit as they are an effect of the history of homosexual politics and identity in the West, the history of the AIDS pandemic, Western approaches to pleasure, and the social relations that guide academic research and journalism. The object before us is not merely an object before us. Its contours—what is worthy of debate—is an effect of a variety of competing social relations that exists within, beside, and beyond the circuit party. Leaving these grounds and social relations unspoken serves the “conservative function of ratification of the doxa”—where we see the circuit in terms of a moral debate—and represents, ultimately, an analytical failure (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 246). The object of analysis remains constrained within the social conditions that



produced that object. “For the sociologist more than any other thinker, to leave one’s thought in a state of unthought is to condemn oneself to be nothing more than the instrument of that which one claims to think” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 238). As a consequence, one is limited to thinking about the circuit in terms of the needs and interests of the critics and proponents—a constraint that does not rupture the way we think about social reality more generally and the circuit in particular: it is still a thing—an institution—imbued with particular properties or qualities that are implicated in community and identity (de)formation.

In order to reconfigure the preconstructed object—and in doing so, create new ground for critical purchase—I consider “the history of the *emergence* [...] of the collective work” that has gone into the preconstruction of the circuit as an object or institution (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 238). Here, I understand “the history of the emergence” to mean the assumptions and analytical priorities embedded in both the critic’s and apologist’s “collective work” of interpreting the meaning and implications of the circuit (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 238). Differently, I think about the assumptions girding the moralizing interpretations and discourses deployed by critics and proponents alike. Doing so accomplishes two things. On the one hand, these moralizing discourses—as interpretations—remain intact insofar as I do not challenge their veracity. Rather, I look for that which unifies them—the social relations that make them possible. On the other hand, thinking about the unifying assumptions girding these interpretations reveals stories different from those already assumed, known, and told. In this manner I am able to remain *within* the interpretations that make up the circuit experience while at the same time begin to re-think—or move against—them.

### ***Pleasure and the Subject***

While interpretations of both critics and proponents are ways of describing and defining the circuit, they are also, in different ways, attempts to account for practice. Each approach is an exploration of how and why practice occurs as it does and attempts to chart out the implications of particular choices. These interpretations operate on the basis of two related logics. On the one hand is the argument that suggests that if an attendee considers the circuit carefully enough, he will be able to engage in practice that will, in some sense, lead to a boon. On the other hand is the argument that the circuit is a

series of determining structures that informs and shapes practice—for better or worse. Embedded in *both* moralizing discourses are two related liberal assumptions. First, the lives of gay men who make the circuit part of their lives will improve via reflection on or during the circuit experience— deprogramming, insights, or breakthroughs will emerge if attendees think carefully enough about what the circuit offers. Second, gay men’s social and political positioning—at least for those who make the circuit part of their lives—is linked to attendance at circuit parties. Things will get worse (drug addiction, low self-esteem) or better (breakthroughs, insight) as gay men do the circuit.

This characterization is obviously a typology. These interpretations, in their pure form, are seldom present in the minds of critics, proponents, or attendees. In fact, critics and proponents adopt a complex and contradictory middle ground. In constructing this typology, I am merely trying to construct the two poles between which interpretations about the circuit travel and do not use these interpretations of the circuit as a means of positioning those who hold them. Indeed, those who are “insiders” to the circuit—those who participate in it—are as likely to hold some critical interpretations of the circuit while those who are “outsiders” are just as likely to be able to see the circuit in a positive light. Rather, I do so as a means of characterising the thinking of those invested—positively or otherwise—in the circuit: claims about what the circuit should be (about) assume there exists a positive way of approaching the circuit and its pleasures—some way of engaging with the circuit “correctly” or more productively than others. If a positional stance is something that needs clarification, then it might be most productive to think about the circuit in terms of those who are more or less invested in seeing the circuit as a positive or negative experience—and not in terms of those who are outsiders/critics and insiders/proponents.

Drawing on Leo Bersani (1988) I want to suggest neither interpretive stance—nor even a combination of the two—is as analytically productive as might initially be assumed. Writing at the height of the AIDS backlash, Leo Bersani (1988) raises some interesting questions about how we use the ideas of sex and sexual pleasure in sexual politics. The AIDS backlash involved clashes between two opposing camps. On the one hand were those on the Right who wished to silence, erase, destroy, forget or otherwise ignore the gay men who were dying as the result of a poorly understood disease and

institutional heterosexism. While complex and multifaceted, this reaction was intimately linked to the notion that gay men somehow deserved their fate insofar as they took sexual pleasure in ways that were un-Godly and unnatural—or at best questionable. Unnatural sex had (super)natural consequences. On the other hand, there was an affirmative mobilisation by sex positive gay activists who argued for the right to have safer sex in whatever fashion one desired. These activists countered the Right by arguing that the models of sexual intimacy adopted by gay men challenged a heterosexist and homophobic notion of what intimacy, sex, relationships, and love constituted.

Bersani (1988) argues that across this spectrum of sexual politics one can find a peculiar commonality—what he calls the *redemptive reinvention of sex*. “This enterprise cuts across usual lines of the battle field of sexual politics” and assumes that there is some purity within sex that might be recovered, as if it could be “less disturbing, less socially abrasive, less violent, [and] more respectful of ‘personhood’” than it currently is (Bersani 1988: 215). Behind the AIDS backlash was the assumption that gay desire violated the naturally and/or divinely ordained purpose—and hence meaning—of sex. The challenge was to find a path through the minefield of desire and shepherd along those who weren’t able to see it for themselves—through force if need be. Sex positive gay activists argued that the sexual possibilities of the body were inherently *amoral*—what was *immoral* was the regulation and violence the Right wished to exercise around what others did with their bodies. Implicit in both the violence toward gay men and the sex-positive rethinking of same sex desire is a pastoralizing, redemptive project based on a “certain agreement about what sex *should* be” (Bersani 1988: 221, emphasis added). All that we need is a clear understanding of what sex and sexual pleasure are *really* about.

Bersani (1988) argues that both arguments are “ways to defend our culture’s lies about sexuality” (p. 222). The lie at the core of the redemptive reinvention of sex is that with enough reflection and shepherding we might come to understand, and thus value, the *true* nature of sex. We are fooling ourselves when we cast sexual pleasure as something that might be healthy or productive if only we were able to situate it in the “right” social relations. The lie is to think and act “as if the sexual [...] could somehow be conceived of apart from all relations of power; [as if sex] were, so to speak, belatedly

contaminated by power from elsewhere” (Bersani 1988: 220). Bersani (1988), in contrast, argues that there is a *constitutive* link between sexual pleasure and the exercise or loss of power. Sexual pleasure always already involves a struggle with the threat of a “shattering of the psychic structures” (p. 217), of a “radical disintegration and humiliation of the self” (p. 217), of a “breakdown of the human itself in sexual intensities” (p. 221), of a “kind of selfless communication with the ‘lower’ orders of being” (p. 221), and of a “self-dismissal, of losing sight of the self” (p.222). At its very best, sexual pleasure leads to a loss of self, where the “self is momentarily disturbed” (p. 217), to a sort of momentary annihilation of the coherent subject in the body’s intensities. It is not so much that power is something *in* which the sexual might be situated as it is that sexual bodily pleasures emerge from and extend into relations of loss and control—and hence power.

Our understanding of sex and power has come from feminist critiques of patriarchy, premised, as they are, on the assumption that sexist social relations are about a denial of power to women. Bersani (1988) argues in a slightly different direction: sexism is not primarily about “the denial of power to women (although it has obviously also led to that, everywhere and at all times), but above all the denial of the *value* of powerlessness in both men and women” (p. 217, emphasis in original). What is at play is not so much control as it is a fear and devaluation of loss. Thus it is not so much a desire to control women that is at the root of sexual inequality as it is a fear of the powerlessness that is inherently grounded in—indeed constitutes—the sexual experience. The point is not to deny that sex takes place within relations of power—clearly it does, with detrimental effects for many. The point is to call a spade a spade—sex and power are not simply discrete forces that intersect to produce better or worse effects for the subject and community. Rather, sex and power are mutually constitutive aspects of the body.

It is on the basis of the idea that bodily pleasure is a moment of self-loss that I would like to think about the assumptions guiding the moralizing discourses of critics and advocates of the circuit. Signorile (1997), Mansergh et al. (2001), writers and editors from *Circuit Noize* magazine, and interview subjects all assume that circuit goes will, with enough thinking, talking, or writing, be able to know and understand the nature and

implications of their pleasures. On the basis of this self-reflection—either on or during the circuit experience—subjects will be able to make appropriate and productive choices. Embedded in this idea is a particularly liberal view of the subject and the social world. Critics, proponents, and attendees of the circuit assume the subject is rational, self-reflexive, and capable of full self-knowledge. Social reality and the social world are understood as a series of risks and opportunities the subject must rationally and carefully negotiate. Here, an autonomous rational self uses reflection to regulate the self and others as he calculates the potential benefits of the social field. Both positions are, in effect, trying to account for practice on the basis of the subject's will or agency.

Practice as an effect of the subject's will—his agency—is apparent in Andy's discussion of the use of steroids in the pursuit of *the look*:

Let me tell you something. There are choices you make in life. It's a choice that you start taking drugs; it's a choice that you start to be sexual, to be sexually active, knowing that there are risks of infection. It's also a choice for you to start using steroids. You start thinking about the health risks that you take when you take steroids. It came to the point where I said, "I wanted to be bigger and I'm willing to take the risks." And whenever I reach a point where I might get side effects because of my steroid use, I will only blame myself because it was a choice I made. No one told me to do so. I don't even want to say it was the scene that pushed me into it. I took the choice. I went out for years without drugs and without steroids. And I said, "Now I want to be [bigger] and I want to fit in to the whole thing because I am more comfortable with it." (Andy)

The role of personal choice is also apparent in Dale's commentary around steroid use:

Ever since I was a kid I always wanted to be big, wanted to be muscular. I always dreamed to be big—it's something I always wanted. And now, if I put more hard work in and with drug enhancement I could get closer to that dream. It's very common. I think all my party friends do steroids. The image of beauty we have in society is hard work. It's a lot of work, it's a big price to pay to be like that, but some people are so determined to be like that, to have that one wish to be like that. If they could have it, I guess I don't see why not. It's a sacrifice you have to make—it's like going to the gym five days a week or sitting in front of a TV five days a week. It's the sacrifice you have to make. It's your own personal choice that you have to choose for yourself. If you make that choice for somebody else, you might turn out to be bitter if it doesn't work out. (Dale)

Both Dale and Andy are very clear about the origin of their desire to embody *the look*.

Andy's use of steroids to approximate *the look* was his own choice. *No one told me to do*

so. He even goes so far as to point out that his decision was unrelated to his circuit experiences: *I don't even want to say it was the scene that pushed me into it. I took the choice. I went out for years without drugs and without steroids.* Similarly, while Dale recognises *the image of beauty we have in society* and the motivating role it plays, he is careful to point out that any pursuit of *the look* must be for one's own personal reasons. *It's your own personal choice that you have to choose for yourself. If you make that choice for somebody else, you might turn out to be bitter if it doesn't work out.*

Practice as an effect of agency is particularly clear in Signorile's recommendations for deprogramming from the cult of masculinity. Deprogramming means "refusing to allow the cult to consume us and to control our lives" (Signorile 1997: 307), a deprogramming that presumably relies on increasing one's awareness of masculinity. He continues:

Deprogramming [...] is about cultivating real intimacy rather than allowing the cult of masculinity to seduce us into thinking that the superficial, often competitive liaisons it offers, as well as their powerful and overwhelming sexual energy, is intimacy. Real intimacy requires hard work: it means being honest with others and ourselves. For some of us it means going into therapy, for others it means having the fortitude to be truthful with ourselves on our own. (Signorile 1997: 314)

Alternatively, deprogramming is about expanding one's horizons "to include men of different generations, different races, different occupations, and different interests (Signorile 1997: 314). Deprogramming is about "taking charge of your life, including decisions about safer sex. Taking charge of safer sex means looking at your individual situation and assessing your needs based on your own sexual behaviour" (Signorile 1997: 315).

Alternatively, Colfax et al. (2001), Ross and Lewis (1995a, 1995b), Mattison et al. (2001), and Mansergh et al. (2001) emphasise the determining effects of structure in their account of community and identity (de)formation. They frame the circuit in terms of a social institution whose structural properties and dynamics may affect attendees' ways of living and choices. Ross and Lewis' (1995b) work "pioneers investigation of the norms, values, belief systems and set and setting of some inner-Sydney gay dance party patrons and how the social world or reality of the dance party milieu may contribute to increased risky sexual behaviour among this population" (p. 1). Mattison et al. (2001)

follows the work of Lewis and Ross, identifying the circuit as a kind of culture with expectations and norms that determines a subject's actions. Signorile's (1997) interpretation is also based on framing the circuit as social structure, attributing a great deal of effect to it: "Many gay men are inextricably linked to the circuit simply because the circuit is one of the driving forces that fuels the cult of masculinity within the gay world" (p. 78). Elsewhere he writes, "And though we are individually responsible for buying into it, it is the circuit that increasingly dictates and further promulgates that ideal" (p. 83).

### **"The best I could say was that it was like bliss"**

While critics and proponents struggle and differ over whether, how, and if the circuit is implicated in community and identity (de)formation, all share a relatively unspoken assumption about the subject: the subject has the capacity to mobilise the reflexive gaze—hindered or aided depending on contextual or structural constraints—necessary to negotiate through the dangers and potentials the circuit poses to the self and to one's community. In different ways, critics and proponents are saying, "Think hard about the circuit and its bodily pleasures because they mean something and they have effects." This is a particularly liberal view of the subject and social world: the subject is rational, self-reflexive, and capable of full self-knowledge while the social world is a series of risks and opportunities through which the subject might carefully—with more or less success, depending on the structures in which he or she is embedded—negotiate. An autonomous rational self uses reflection to regulate the self and others as he or she calculates the potential benefits of the social field. The circuit, however, raises questions about this capacity. Listening to attendees, one can hear language—and the cognitive, analytical, and reflexive possibilities that hinge on language—fail as it encounters the circuit's pleasures:

You know what it was like? The best I could say was that it was like bliss.  
(Fieldnotes 1998)

I didn't know a body could sustain this much pleasure. My flesh  
threatened to come out of my skin. (Fieldnotes 1998)

Your senses are completely heightened to a certain extent. You're arms  
are in the air, you're coming out of your skin. Physically your touch and

everything just seem more real I guess, or you...I'm short of descriptions for this. (Jaret)

The circuit is—if anything—about *visceral pleasures*. Proponents argue that one has to experience the pleasures of the circuit—to be part of the circuit—in order to understand it. Critics argue that the pleasures of the circuit are dangerous, that insiders are too close—too locked up in their bodily pleasures—to really understand what is occurring. In either moralizing discourse, the problem is embodiment—either bodily experience is in the way of true understanding or one has to have it in order to understand the circuit experience. In short, what unites both critics and proponents of the circuit is the assumption that attendees may better understand themselves through (reflection on) the circuit's pleasures.

Reflection and analysis—deprogramming from the cult of masculinity or developing insight into the self—depend on language, on some capacity to objectify and reflect upon experience. And yet, pleasure—central to the circuit's structure—sees to the disintegration of the self and experience. It escapes language. Calls for re-evaluating drug use, for safer sex, for critical understandings of the “cult of masculinity”, and real intimacy all paradoxically assume the presence of a reflecting subject who is, upon the experience of his pleasures, unable to reflect on himself. On the edge of pleasure, in a state *like bliss*, the rational self, the subject who might know and assess risks and opportunities through careful reflection, disintegrates: *you're coming out of your skin*. Within pleasure, there is no subject who understands, no self to be understood. The pleasures of the body are moments where the experiencing self is lost, where language—so central to critical and careful reassessments of risk and benefit—fails to capture the experiencing body. *I'm short of descriptions for this*. How does one reflect on bliss? How might one reflect on something that cannot be described?

This is not to suggest that we need not—or cannot—consider the dangers and possibilities associated with the circuit. Signorile (1997), Manserger et al. (2001), Colfax et al. (2001) and others are correct; it would be dangerous to ignore the links between the circuit, sex, drug use, and the cult of masculinity. At the same time, to deny claims made about community or Frank's bonding would be an act of violence—these are real experiences, as real as any other's experiences. The use of drugs, the pursuit of sex, and improved interpersonal relations of intimacy with the self and others are real issues and I



do not contest this reality. What I contest is that both critics and advocates do not take the centrality of sexuality, drug use, and questions about intimacy—and their *pleasurable* pursuit—seriously enough. I am not suggesting that subjects are black boxes and all we need is an understanding of the right stimulus-response mechanism; nor does this mean that subjects are guided by an unconscious that merely needs deciphering. Nor is it to think of pleasure as something that we must overcome—as if we might encapsulate or cordon off pleasure. It is to suggest that significant aspects of the circuit and its experience are ineffable, perhaps beyond *understanding of why we do it*:

The [circuit] culture is part of what we do and there might not be any understanding of why we do it. Like why do Eskimos eat raw fish? Why do people do this? Why do people do that? The gay circuit party is just a part of our culture. It's who we are. (Peter)

The moment of pleasure, as part of our embodied experience, stretches beyond understanding, cognition, or rational reflection. It has an irrefutable facticity. It's *just a part of our culture. It's who we are*. It just is. Attendees capture and convey bliss by telling others “you have to be there” and the desire to experience pleasure—drug use, sexual, or otherwise—is not constrained by threats or pleas to do otherwise. The body and its pleasures escape attempts to cordon it off, capture, or analyse it. Against pleasure, the self-reflecting gaze becomes inert.

If we accept that pleasure is closely linked to much—though certainly not all—of what destroys us (unsafe sex, drug use) *and* what makes us better (the delight we take in sociality and intimate relations), then the subject assumed by those who make the very necessary calls for harm reduction, safer sex strategies, and inter/personal growth in or through circuit events needs reconceptualization. By assuming pleasure is something we can decipher or cordon off we exclude the ineffable—the body, embodiment, bodily experience—from how we think about the subject and in doing so we necessarily set our analytical efforts up for failure because we exclude an aspect of the self that is constitutive of the self and practice.

One of the critiques that can be levelled against this liberal conceptualisation of the relationship between agency, will, and structure is that it glosses over the embodied nature of the self and lived experience. Critics and proponents understand the body as merely something that the self can reflect upon, know, and monitor. In effect this ignores

the role *bliss*—pleasure and bodily experience—plays in shaping action and hence identity and community. Bodily experience is a unique aspect of the subject and his or her agency, an aspect that is irreducible to either will or structure. It is, as Csordas eloquently argues, the ground upon which culture and identity are based (Csordas 1994, 1999). Framing the subject as disembodied self able to negotiate through the potentials and pitfalls of the circuit forgets that many aspects of these potentials and pitfalls are experienced through the body—a level of experience that is recalcitrant when it comes to meaning, control, or change. The body has its own will above and beyond the subject's will and above and beyond the structures it lives in (Alder 1990).

An active construction of the circuit must incorporate bodily experience—a state *like bliss*—into the conceptualization of the subject assumed by those who would analyze the circuit. I am not arguing that the (de)formation of identity and community—through drug use, safer sex, bonding, and body fascism—are not part and parcel of the circuit experience. What I am arguing is that thinking about this (de)formation through the notion of a subject who is able to reflect on a state *like bliss* prohibits a rethinking of these issues. By “forgetting” that the subject's self-reflexive gaze becomes inert as it reflects on bodily experience, critics, proponents, and attendees are limited to thinking about community and identity (de)formation in terms of the will to transform the self or the application of will to resist surrounding social structures. Practice is understood in terms of either agency or structure—or a poorly articulated combination of the two. Without critically engaging with embodiment—without incorporating a state *like bliss* into how we conceptualize the subject—neither critic nor proponent will be able to grapple with the circuit or its purported effects in any novel or critical manner. To ignore the way *bliss* is constitutive of the self is, in short, a doxic move. Alternatively, raising the challenges associated with the body—the irreducibility of bodily experience—represents a means of remaining committed to concerns about community and identity (de)formation but thinking about these concerns within a different register. Differently, the body and bodily experience can give us different questions, modes of inquiry, and answers about community and identity (de)formation. It is in this fashion—by highlighting the body and bodily experience—that I hope to resist the preconstructed

object while at the same time accepting the validity of the lived experience and problem of community and identity (de)formation.

## **First Hand Knowledge and Naïve Questions**

In the following section, I continue elaborating on the body and bodily experience in the circuit. In particular, I explore how my own status as an insider helped hide the centrality of the body and bodily experience. Following Bourdieu, my analytical proposition is that those with first hand knowledge of the circuit frame it through a “series of supremely naïve questions” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 231). These questions produce and delimit—that is, preconstruct—the circuit as an object of analysis. In light of the concerns and questions that “come to the mind” of an insider, the circuit becomes an institution investigated in terms of its role in the (de)formation of community and identity. In raising this aspect of the trap of the preconstructed object, my desire is to begin shifting the register through which critics and proponents can understand the circuit—to move through the preconstructed object of community and identity (de)formation—and construct the circuit in terms of a field of social relations.

It is with this in mind that I turn to a second strategy Bourdieu advocates for avoiding the trap of the preconstructed object. He suggests using a “square-table of the pertinent properties of a set of agents or institutions” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 230). In such a table, the analyst enters each relevant institution on a line and creates a new column for each structural or functional property necessary to characterize those institutions. This comparison between institution and property compels the analyst to question all other intuitions on the presence of absence of this property. After such a comparison, he advises the elimination of

equivalent traits so as to retain all those traits—and only those traits—that are capable of discriminating between the different institutions and are thereby analytically relevant [...]. It is at the cost of such a work of construction, which is not done in one stroke but by trial and error that one progressively constructs social spaces which, though they reveal themselves only in the form of highly abstract objective relations, and although one can neither touch them nor ‘point to them,’ are what makes the whole reality of the social world. (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 230)

It was this strategy which I began to employ in Chapter 3 as I thought about the relations between the circuit, gyms, baths, and other dance venues—comparing the circuit to other

institutions that are, in some sense, quintessentially gay men's institutions. I initially considered the details of these interpretations under the assumption that I might find some critical purchase within the interpretations of those who make the circuit a part of their lives. I assumed that buried in the details of these interpretations there existed something—a contradiction, an issue, a debate, a puzzle—that might give way or crack if scrutinized closely enough. In short, I argued that I might find a devil in the details provided I looked carefully enough at—that is, respected and gave voice to—emic interpretations. In retrospect, I see how this ethical/methodological strategy was coloured by my status as an insider—as one with first hand knowledge. Indeed, there was a devil to be found, but he was not in the details. Rather he came in on the shoulder of an insider.

As I engaged with how attendees understood the relationship or difference between the circuit and other institutions that cater to the construction and confirmation of gay men's identities and desires, our conversations rested on a series of nearly silent assumptions. In effect, questions and concerns about community and identity—things that naturally “come to the mind” of one who “wonders about himself or herself”—rested on silences about aspects of the circuit that, in Alex's terms, went *without saying*. What occurred was a glossing over of certain details—details that go *without saying*, details that are so obvious as to not be worth mentioning. Things like the size, magnitude, and production value of a circuit event—things that struck me as significant upon my initial encounter with the circuit—slipped under the surface of familiarity. It is with an awareness that my first hand knowledge highlighted functional properties of the circuit—concerns about community and identity (de)formation, the trap of the preconstructed object—while obscuring other properties—properties which went *without saying*—that I return, once again, to some of the details previously considered. In particular, I use these details as a way of thinking more carefully about how that which *goes without saying* is intimately connected to the body and bodily experience.<sup>5</sup>

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5 On visiting and re-visiting the details of the object of analysis, Bourdieu writes:

The construction of an object [...] is not something that is effected once and for all, with one stroke, through a sort of inaugural theoretical act. The program of observation and analysis through which it is effected is not a blueprint that you draw up in advance, in the manner of an engineer. It is, rather, a protracted and exacting task that is accomplished little by little, through a whole series of small rectifications and amendments. (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 227)

When Tom and I spoke about the circuit, he, like others, cast his discussion in terms of the impact the circuit can have on gay men who experience a sense of isolation:

it's an eye-opening experiencing. I remember talking to my mother about it and saying how many people were at the last circuit event I was at. Or an RSVP Cruise<sup>6</sup>. And she was amazed that they could fill a cruise boat. I don't think they realized how many people are gay. (Tom)

On my initial interpretation, what emerged most clearly from Tom's ideas was how the circuit functions as a mechanism for allowing one to find a place in a larger gay community—how the circuit contributes to the formation of community. Glossed over—in both the interview and in the readings that followed this interview—was what, precisely, invoked an *eye-opening experience*. What Tom reflects on is not so much the presence of gay men as it is the number of gay men—*how many people*. Elsewhere, when I asked Tom about the difference between circuit events and dance clubs, he stated:

This was about scale; with a lot of the circuit parties it's the magnitude. It's not about going back to your childhood memories in high school where you think you're the only one on the face of the earth. It's like "Holy Moly!" We've booked all the hotels. I think it's fantastic. Makes you feel like you are part of a larger community I suppose. It gives you the sense of the magnitude of our community — that we are financially able to pull this off and that we are not relegated to be in some old dilapidated building or warehouse space. We talked about the social aspect—part of the attraction is when a circuit party takes over entire sections of the city. I think that gets back to the things that I was saying politically and socially. The magnitude of what we are doing. (Tom)

In listening to Tom I returned to my own high school memories and the desire I had to find some place among others like me. Consequently, I read *magnitude* in only one way: in terms of a confirmation of one's place in a larger community that has a political and social presence. An insider status privileges a "whole series of supremely naïve questions" about community and identity confirmation. What (re)emerges from these details is not so much a consideration of the way a circuit event contributes to the (de)formation of community and identity as does a consideration of *magnitude*.

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<sup>6</sup> RSVP Cruises is a gay and lesbian travel company which caters to gay and lesbian travelers by constructing gay-only and gay-friendly vacations on land and sea.

Magnitude can mean a number of things: the size of the event, the size of the physical space, the number of attendees, and the vast impression of sameness (despite variations) in *the look* and appearance. Jaret captures this well:

The magnitude of the event I guess plays the biggest role. There's more to it. There's more energy, there's more people, there's more lights, there's bigger music, there's more music, better music. Everything's bigger and better, or supposed to be bigger and better. The magnitude of scale, the size of the event, they seem to just sort of really maximize or push the barriers on venues and capacities. (Jaret)

While the magnitude of a circuit event manifests itself in several ways, the reactions attendees have to the circuit bear an important uniformity. Sam offers the following recollection of his first circuit event:

I remember walking in and thinking, "Oh my God! Where did all these men come from?" It was like a sea of buff muscle boys, kind of everywhere. It was like "Holy shit!" Up until then I had a lot of exposure around the world to gay culture—but there had always had been a mix—you would have a few muscle boys, a few really feminine guys, and you'd have some drag queens, and you'd have dyke lesbians, and your real butch ones, and your lipstick lesbians. You'd have a mix, but here they filtered it out; it was just these buff boys, with a few wild fierce sorts of drag queens thrown in here and there. And it was just like "Holy shit where did these guys come from?" (Sam)

An initial consideration of Sam's comments invoked questions and concerns about the relationship between *the look* and community. In fact, much of our conversation circulated around questions as to how or if *the look* prohibited some attendees from participating in the circuit. As a member of this community, I, along with others, am aware that *the look* and body image organize the circuit experience and attendees must regularly work through *the look* in some fashion. This is a concern that immediately comes to the mind of "one who wonders about himself or herself".

On closer inspection, however, considerations of *the look* are bound not only to concerns about exclusions based on aesthetics, but also tied to being overwhelmed by the scale or magnitude of the number of individuals you see to possess *the look*. Sam recalls the magnitude of the circuit: *It was like a sea of buff muscle boys*. My own reaction to a *sea of buff muscle boys* was similar and the pleasure it invoked was something I wanted to share with others:

After we took our coats to the coat check, I was intent on getting Drew up to the balcony so he could see the crowd on the dance floor from a higher vantage point. I made him close his eyes and held his hand as we made our way to the balcony. I positioned him as near dead middle as I could, put his hand on the railing and told him to open his eyes. Below us was a sea of beautiful men doing the throbbing dance that we come for. Drew was stunned; his mouth dropped and he said, “Oh my god, I didn’t think it would be that big.” (Fieldnotes 2000, Drew)

Note here that Drew is reacting to the magnitude of the event: *Oh my god, I didn’t think it would be that big*. It is worth noting that his reactions had little to do with a consideration of the circuit’s place in community and identity formation. The view of the dancefloor that I shared with Drew gave me butterflies and made my skin tingle. That both Sam and I draw on the sea as a metaphor to capture the magnitude of the circuit is telling. As a metaphor, “sea” evokes an object and experience that is so large as to be nearly inconceivable, one whose size can threaten to overcome the subject.

Frank’s description of his first experience captures the significance of this eloquently:

I was just overwhelmed by the size of them; just the size of them. All the men there looked like they all worked out. It was pretty overwhelming; pretty overwhelming. (Frank)

What I wish to highlight in Frank’s comments is the *nature* of his reaction to the magnitude of the events. To be *overwhelmed* is to be taken over by emotion—it is to be weighed down by the body. Dale’s recollection of his reaction to the magnitude of the circuit parallels Frank’s:

I don’t know what happened. That event had the *most beautiful* men I’ve ever seen in the world—they were *all* there. I’ve never seen so many good looking men in my life and they were all *big* and *beefy* and I don’t know what triggered it, but I started getting paranoid. I just felt like that people were staring at me and I didn’t like that experience. I felt that people were just looking at me and I don’t know why, but I just got scared. I think maybe it was just that I was so overwhelmed by all these people they were so beautiful and everything. (Dale)

Here Dale also speaks about the magnitude of the events: *the most beautiful men I’ve ever seen in the world—they were all there. I’ve never seen so many good looking men in all my life*. And while Frank mentions feeling overwhelmed by this magnitude, Dale

speaks of feeling *paranoid* and *scared*. As with being overwhelmed, to be scared is to be seized and controlled by emotion—to be seized by the body.

A primarily bodily reaction to the circuit also manifests itself in the degree of apprehension or anxiety attendees regularly experience just prior to attending an event:

I get cold hands. I have cold hands up until maybe an hour after I get there. I guess it's the excitement of school children going to the first day of school or going on a field trip or something. I just get nervous. It just passes usually within the first hour. I get like "Okay, this is good; I'm going to have a good time here tonight." I guess once I get there, I get, like within the hour, comfortable. Not knowing how it's going to be. I mean, even if you've been to a circuit event before, every night could be different or something. So not knowing if it's going to be a good crowd or something could happen that could ruin your evening. So I guess until I am sure that nothing is going to go wrong or I am not going to have a good time I'm kind of nervous. (Bill)

I get butterflies in my stomach. Before the last event I went to, I told my friend that I felt high—and I hadn't taken the drugs yet. And he said, "What do you mean?" And I told him that my skin was all tingly. I feel like I'm high. I get goose bumps. I think it's excitement. I think it's like stage fright a little bit. And I don't think it's because of the drugs because we've been doing the same drugs for the past 3 years. (Scott)

When asked to elaborate on this apprehension, those interviewed noted that it does not regularly occur in relation to other sites—and if it does it is hardly to the same extent.

You don't necessarily have butterflies when you go to an after hours or a local event. With a local party, the comfort level is pretty immediate. Because there is that lack of excitement, it may not be electric when you get in there—like the energy is not through the roof—people are not screaming and jumping and yelling. (Marc)

There is then, a way in which anxiety and apprehension is specific to a circuit event.

What is most noteworthy, however, is where this apprehension and anxiety is located: *I get cold hand; butterflies in my stomach; my skin was all tingly; I got goose bumps*. This apprehension—a reaction to the circuit—is located in the body.

In retrospect, my questions about, and focus on, community and identity (de)formation was nearly relentless. So much so that Alex felt compelled to remind me of the centrality of another intensely bodily experience—dancing:

You know one thing that I haven't really talked about that is big for me at a circuit party is dancing. I love to dance. For the most part that's what you're doing all fucking night. And it's about feeling like sexy when



you're dancing. I totally love dancing now. I do. I dance for twelve hours straight and that's not enough. I could dance more. It just feels so good to be dancing. (Alex)

Indeed, despite the fact that Alex speaks about the importance of the act of dancing and how good it feels—*it feels so good to be dancing*—I used these ideas in Chapter 2 to speak about how dance at a circuit event was social—as part of the process of community and identity (de)formation. And indeed this dance is social—but it also deserves mention for the fact that it is a profound bodily act through which an attendee converts a soundscape into a physical representation. When I asked Alex about the relationship between gay or gay-friendly gyms and circuit events, he observed that *the working out replaces the dance. It can be like a dance in a way*. Alex's rendering of working out in terms of dancing suggests that what are important—and what was suppressed by our knowledge that *there's more dancing, definitely, at the circuit party, but that goes without saying*—are the body and its movements.

The devil on my shoulder—the “supremely naïve questions” which came to my mind—also informed how I chose to reflect on the role of touch and physical contact in the circuit experience. In Chapter 2, touch became a means to explain how attendees converted physical space on a dance floor into meaningful social space. I also highlighted the way attendees used touch to differentiate themselves from others: *When straight boys go out they beat the shit out of each other and trash the place. When we go out, we take our shirts off and hug each other. I'm telling you, we're a different gender*. My concerns and questions about identity and community (de)formation glossed over how the pleasure of touch—as a bodily sensual experience—characterizes the circuit experience. Here, I interpreted touch in functional terms—as something that contributed to, led to, or did something for the (de)formation of community and identity. Thus when Alex told me:

I love to touch as many people as I can. I don't know what that's about. I love having someone touch my dick, love showing off my dick, touching my dick. I want to touch all the dicks I can [laughter]. (Alex)

I read this in functional terms—I understood touching dick as a means of indexing sexual interest. Here, however, the devil of community and identity formation rears its head. It is a bit of a ruse to think about sex as merely a “physical thing“. While sex is certainly

bodily in nature, sexual practice is also profoundly social. Sex is never merely about the body—to have sex is to make statements about who one is as well as where one belongs. Later, however, Alex elaborates by pointing out that his desire to *touch as many people as I can* or *all the dicks I can* is about play and exploration, suggesting that touch is also about the pleasure of touch in and of itself:

I've sucked a guy on the dance floor. Gone to the bathroom and sucked a guy a little bit, but never to orgasm. [But it's also more] about play and touching and exploration. (Alex)

That touching on a dance floor is not necessarily about sex is something all those interviewed were clear about. Touch for the purposes of sex was part of their experience, but they were equally keen on making a distinction between touch that was sexual and touch that they characterised as playful, sensual, “warm and fuzzy”, or erotic. Thus, as much as touch might be about community and identity (de)formation, touch is also bound up in a set of tactile pleasures with valances and applications more diffuse than the concerns about community, identity, friendship, bonding, or even sex. The desire *to touch as many people* as one may simply be about that: the desire to touch, to explore the body and bodily sensations.

Marc, reflecting on his first experience, comments on the novelty—what I read as the uniqueness—of touch in the context of the circuit:

And then I'm in a roomful of half-naked men that are holding me and touching me. And it was not really necessarily sexual. I'd never really been in a room full of men who were grabbing and touching. It was not that I had never been intimate with people, but *never* in a public space like this, where it was just okay to touch and be touched and to hold and to be held. (Marc)

Here, Marc speaks of intimate contact in relatively immediate—that is, bodily—terms, terms relatively free from a consideration of identity and community (de)formation: *it was just okay to touch and be touched and to hold and to be held*. The centrality of the body and bodily experience also emerges in Drew's reflections. After attending his first major circuit event, I asked him for his thoughts. For him, it raised a series of questions about touch:

I asked Drew what he thought about the party. He said something like, “Tonight felt like it was all about feeling each other out, trying to figure

out the ideas you have or the ideas you have from others, about what's going on. Not being sure if or how to be touching someone or whatever. There's a getting to know you feeling, where you're wondering, 'Is it okay if I touch this person or is it okay if they touch me?'" (Fieldnotes 2000, Drew)

In puzzling through what to do with touch, Drew is struggling, fundamentally, with what to do with bodies and bodily experiences—his own and other's.

The emphasis on how and if the circuit contributes to community and identity (de)formation also led me to gloss over another aspect of the circuit that *goes without saying*. Recall when I asked Dale to reflect on the differences between the circuit and bathhouses, he replied:

They are separate universes because they don't have productions, they don't have the shows. They don't have the men there who attend for dancing purposes. There are some people who go to circuit events that are not there for sex. They are there for a good time; they are there to party with their friends. (Dale)

At this point in the interview, I can recall thinking to myself that bathhouses frequently play circuit-like music as a means of creating atmosphere and perhaps masking the ubiquitous sounds of multiple human bodies having sex with each other. I drew a parallel—equivalence in fact—between the sound of the circuit and the sound one might hear in a bathhouse. I also made the assessment that because Dale—I assumed—didn't have a great deal of experience with bathhouses, he would not *really* be able to offer an accurate or valid comparison. In hindsight, I am astonished that I was able to mount and support this internal doubt—a doubt that carried itself throughout remaining interviews. In asking attendees to compare the circuit with bathhouses or gay and gay friendly gyms, I regularly made reference to the suggestion that the music was similar. By this logic, one might say that jumping off a curb is equivalent to sky-diving.

A similar blind spot emerged as I asked Tom to think about the relationship between the circuit and the gym:

They need to crank up the volume and turn down the lights. But otherwise it seems similar doesn't it? Especially at my gym, the people that definitely go to them, talk about them afterwards [pause]. (Tom)

Immediately after making this observation, Tom continued:

But I don't see a lot of sexual energy at the gym. You may see someone you are attracted to and act flirtatious. But it's not [pause] I don't know. I'd have to say it's a difference in kind. I don't go to the gym to flirt or to meet somebody or to gain interest in somebody. It is somewhat social but again, not sexually. The boys at my gym aren't pretty. (Tom)

At this point in the interview, I also recall reading Tom's revision as a confirmation of my belief that the gym and the circuit had more equivalency in terms of being about community (de)formation than difference. I made the erroneous—and arrogant—assumption that Tom's initial reaction was a more accurate or valid assessment as to what he really felt and thought. It is only in hindsight, with the devil firmly in hand, that I am able to see the significance and importance of what Scott said as he responded to my query about the relationship or parallels between circuit experiences and the circuit and bathhouses. Like Dale and Tom, he stated: *there isn't the lights or the music or the energy*.

Despite my initial blindness to the issue, *the lights or the music or the energy* are significant structural properties that are unique to the circuit. For Dale, Tom, and Scott the difference was obvious—no gym, no bathhouse, and except for a very few, no dance club, has the production value of a circuit event. In comparing the circuit to dance clubs, Ben made a similar distinction:

A circuit event is different from a dance club because a circuit party is both a party and or a place and or a location where people come from outside of their geographic area to hear or experience music and lights and shows by performers or DJs. (Ben)

Here, by pointing out that circuit attendees regularly travel *to hear or experience music and lights and shows by performers or DJs*, Ben highlights the centrality of what goes *without saying* and what I dismissed as merely technical issues. A unique structural property of the circuit experience is the quality—and more importantly—the nature of the entertainment. The centrality of the entertainment emerges more clearly in Frank's discussion of his first event:

And I knew people that were going there specifically to hear that particular DJ. That was something I'd never done before. I'd never gone somewhere, *like flown* somewhere, just to hear the DJ. And I had friends who were doing that. (Frank)

It is not merely the presence of entertainment that shifts the orbit of a dance event from a *simple dance* to a circuit party. It is the expectation and knowledge that the entertainment will, in all likelihood, be quite good. As Tom points out, circuit parties are not *just* parties:

They are *great* parties—not mediocre parties, they're usually *great* parties. And if you're going to bother going to something you might as well make it a circuit party. (Tom)

Differently, a circuit party is unique in terms of its *production*:

These events would have a lot more investment put in them, with a lot more stimulus as far as music and visuals and that sort of thing; a lot more money, a lot more organisation. (Frank)

I think it's got to have a fairly well-known DJ as the talent. And I think it's got to have entertainment as well as lights and visuals. And it's in a big room. (Marc)

Big rooms are not merely big in terms of size or volume, nor are they necessarily actual rooms. They are big in terms of the drama they offer: the floor of Montreal's Olympic Stadium, the grounds of Disney's MGM theme park, 6000 feet up on the side of a snow covered mountain under a full moon, or outdoors, at the foot of a desert mountain range, under a large tent:

We were dancing under a huge tent with giant daisies projected on the ceiling; you could see the sun setting in the background on the mountains behind Palm Springs. There was a Ferris wheel going around in the background and there were fireworks going off. And it was just unfucking-believable. It was totally amazing. (Alex)

It is here that we return to the notion of magnitude: attendees expect the scope and scale of a circuit party's production to be breath-taking—the light shows, the sound system, the performers, visual displays, décor, chill spaces, and the architecture of a circuit event are assumed, and expected to be, dazzling.

Circuit boys spend a lot of money and they're very critical about who is spinning the music, what the lights are like, who's doing the lights, and the shows. They're very critical about how things are set up. They want top-quality productions. After a while you become more selective—because of the cost and the quality of the party. The most important thing is the production. How well is the event put together? Is it worth the value of the ticket? Like Gay Disney was very good dollar for dollar. I was very

impressed by that. I was blown away by the show, and the performance, and how the whole thing went off without a glitch. (Dale)

My own recollection of this same party is one of astonishment—as probably the best production I have attended. The light show and skills of the lighting designer have come to represent, for me, a point of comparison for all the other light shows—to the point where it is possible to identify the lighting designer from his style and approach to light. A dance performance—a flawless and very sexy number involving a dozen dancer undulating across the stage—preceded a mesmerizing quasi-Cirque du Soleil performance in which a single man, surrounded by mist, held aloft and spun about his body a shining silver pole that magically transformed into an even larger square that then became a spinning ten foot cube in and around which he danced. The exceptional music was broken only by the occasional flash and heat of indoor fireworks and the boom of confetti cannons sending silver and gold mylar across the audience. The night ended with a seamlessly integrated drag performance and roaring applause and hoots and whistles from the audience followed with claims made by the drag queen that the DJ “was the bomb”.

Marc sums up these qualities as being about *spectacle*:

So when you talk about something like an after-hours bar or after-hours parties—like the ones we’re having for Gay Pride—they are on a smaller scale, in a smaller room. They may have some of the right elements, like entertainment or a DJ that’s fairly well known, so I think it’s something about the scale. But it’s more than scale. I think if you had scale without entertainment or with a DJ who didn’t know how to work you, it wouldn’t be a circuit party either. Circuit is 10,000 people outdoors with fireworks and drag shows and big fucking DJs and a million beautiful people. So it has something to do with spectacle. The entertainment is definitely a part of it. A singer here and there and a show here and there and good dancers and some costumes and lights and a few explosions and confetti cannons make a circuit party. A circuit party is not a few local boys dancing on stage with a decent DJ—that is not a circuit party. Not to me. That can still be a great party, but it’s not a circuit party. So it has something with spectacle as well as scale. (Marc)

For Kyle, without the spectacle, a circuit party is less than what it could be—and it is, in fact, no longer a circuit party:

I enjoy shows. I really enjoy shows. Not a singer though—or something like that—a *show*. Like a group show—something that entertains you.

And when circuit parties don't have them—it's just kind of like a rave.  
(Kyle)

When asked to characterize what sets a circuit performance apart from other forms of entertainment, John's description circulates around performances that surprises expectations and stretch the bounds of both the human imagination and the body:

There's more imagination in a circuit performance that will blow your mind. They are shows that you can't think of—and all of a sudden these people thought them up, put them on stage, and blow you away—they surprise you. At a circuit show you just never know what to expect so you're always surprised. There is the element of surprise—every time something new comes on it's like, "Wow." You just don't expect it. It's almost like going to a circus act kind of thing. At Black and Blue a few years ago, they really pushed the human body—like when they had Cirque du Soleil there, who are known for that. (John)

The presence of high quality entertainment is not, however, quite enough. A quality performance is more than a singer getting up on stage or even a troupe of excellent dancers—although this can certainly be part of the equation. Performances extend beyond merely what is on stage to include not only the interaction between performers and participants, but also interaction between participants:

I've been to concerts with great singers and huge audiences—like Elton John with 20,000 people. But it's not quite the same. When you go to a concert everybody just sits down or stands up and watches what's going on. In the circuit party everybody participates. There is the music that is surrounding you, as part of the environment. It's part of the air that you breathe. And then everybody is interacting with each other. And that doesn't happen in a concert. (Scott)

That same feeling isn't generated at something like a Cher concert—that same magic isn't there at a concert as there is at a circuit show. The bonding issue within the concert audience doesn't exist as much as it does for a circuit party show for starters. And it's not the drugs. If you do drugs at a concert you still aren't going to be as happy as you are at a circuit party. You're overjoyed when you see a good show at a circuit party. You're just overjoyed. And that has never happened to me at a concert.  
(John)

Both Scott and John use this participatory aspect to distinguish a circuit production from other related experiences. John in fact understands that at first or even second glance, the claims about the unique or spectacular quality of a circuit production would appear suspect:

If you told somebody who hasn't gone, well they would ask, "Why would you get excited for a show?" And yeah, sitting here right now, why would I? But in that environment when you got 10,000 people at a circuit party, all watching a show, all cheering it on, with the energy and the performers—and you know what the performers are feeling and somehow the magic that comes out of it—you can't describe it. (John)

There are at least two major ideas embedded in this understanding of the circuit's production value. What is telling is which one I initially chose to foreground.

What stood out and what I took notice of was that a well timed and well executed performance involves a degree of participation by everyone involved—it includes the skills of both the DJ and the lighting designer and participation from the audience. Performer, DJ, lighting designer, and audience participate in—indeed, they are part of—the show. A good performance involves the entire room—the lines of vision and influence are circular. And while there is certainly this sort of feed back in non-circuit performance—concerts or other performances—the scale and scope of this effect is negligible in comparison:

Something's happening on the stage. The curtain—a thick and heavy reddish velvety looking one—is gone. At the back of the stage are platforms or scaffolding—people are standing on them. From here on the balcony it looks like they're dressed in black pants and white shirts—like waiters. Boys stop dancing a bit and everyone's attention turns to them—people tap people on the shoulder and point to the stage. The platforms start to descend to the stage floor—elegant and slow, like a mystery. They're on elevators or something. The performers do this little skip—quick and tight—off the risers and form a single line across the stage facing the audience. With a precise tiny motion, they place their hands on their hips and one foot just ahead of the other. They stand very still and in all the craziness that's been going on all night, things seem to stop. And then the boys start to hoot and holler. How it's possible I don't know, but I get goose bumps *again*—the hairs on my arms and back and neck prickle up—despite the fact that it's hotter than hell in here. This is going to be good.

And then the music does this hard techno thing and the volume goes up a notch—it's like a diesel train, running at you, through you. The beats are loud and hard hard hard. And then there's more noise—a loud rippling clattering on wood. On the stage the performers move—all in unison—lift their right foot and drop them to the stage floor with a clear hard smack of sole on hardwood floor. The sound is thunderous—hitting all the techno beats at the right time. And then it dawns on me—this is like some sort of line dancing, like Irish river dancing, or Scottish sword dancing—all done



to a loud techno beat. Their movements—quick hops back, forward, to the side—are precise, tight and economical—small purposeful steps. But the sound is *deafening*. It's huge, everywhere at once. It's not something you hear—I'm feeling it in my bones and muscles and my teeth more than in my ears. The dancers make light looking steps but pound out bone jarring rhythms and it's hard not to move to what they are doing. The boys go nuts—everyone on the dance floor—what 3000 guys?—*all* their hands are in the air, screams and whoops. How can this get any louder? The energy coming from the crowd is palpable—and the dancers—I can see their smiles from *here*. They are *loving* this. You know they've never had an audience like this. And then if it wasn't like they were stomping out beats hard enough—they throw back all the energy from the crowd by double timing their stomping—they work their stomping in between the beats of the techno mix—a bang comes from the stage followed by one from the music. Every time they drop their feet to the floor I can feel the noise in my jaw. I catch myself screaming—my hands are in the air. When did that happen? The show goes on for a long while and I can't stop myself from moving. Fuck this is so cool.

As the show begins to come to a close, the performers give a series of stomps that could break glass. The beats enter my chest and with every bang fills my lungs—I feel almost invaded by sound—and I can smell the sweat and the boys and the screams and the whoops all over. The speed is so quick—each step happens so fast that everything sounds like one big continuous bang, like an engine. It's in my legs and chest and jaw, it's rattling my brain and the lights go out with an enormous CLAP and the crowd screams and screams and screams. The DJ drops an incredible piece of music on the crowd—and the boys are again one carpet like organism moving in unison, all red with the lights and the flesh and the heat and the guys below are back into a groove. I can't stop moving, arms in the air. The music builds to a crescendo; it's like someone has hooked strings to everyone, slowly pulling everyone up higher and higher. From here, up above on the balcony, it begins to look as though the men were *floating* off the dance floor. I've never seen things this crazy before and the music has pulled people higher than I have every seen. God this is amazing. And then another bang; the DJ knocks out a mix and the boys drop to move with such force and such fierceness. It's all muscles and grinding and energy and they are MOVING. And the screaming and hollering. The lights dim and what must be hundreds of lasers shine from every direction—from the balcony down, from the crowd to the ceiling, across the dance floor, from the stairs in every direction, a criss-cross of red and green lines; yellow fans in the corner whirling like a dream, glow sticks of every colour mark dazzling traces in the air and the music DOES NOT STOP. (Fieldnotes 1999)

While I understood that the scale and scope of the entertainment at a circuit event have the propensity to be spectacular—that a circuit event has an order of magnitude different

from other forms of mass entertainment, like a Cher or Elton John concert—what I chose to focus on and highlight was the degree and nature of the participation of all those involved. In reading through the data I gathered and listening to those interviewed, what fluoresced—because it came to the mind “of one who wonders about himself or herself”—were questions about community and identity (de)formation (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 231). In particular, I held on to the notion that *the bonding issue within the concert audience doesn't exist as much as it does at a circuit party*.

What received less play in how I chose to unpack the circuit was the emphasis attendees place on how they experience the circuit as an encompassing phenomenon, where the boundary between event and self becomes permeable. Both Scott and John used the notion of *environment*—as a metaphor for an experience that encompasses attendees in a unique way—to help account for the experience: *There is the music that is surrounding you, as part of the environment. It's part of the air that you breathe:*

I just think they are amazing experiences—the sound itself that encompasses you—it literally beats through you in some of these places.  
(Tom)

Up the stairs and through the hall, the light changes—darker but somehow warmer, more orange, soothing. The temperature changes too—it was like walking through a soft yielding wall. The air was humid here, the music louder, then louder, then louder, moving from an aural thing to a physical thing—it's no longer in my ears, it's already vibrating in my lungs, filling my legs, moving down my hips. If it had a taste it would have been fleshy and pulpy. In front of me, past the bar are a series of wide gentle steps that slope toward the dance floor. Boys are grinding to the music, which is becoming impossibly loud. Speaker stacks are to the left and right of the dance floor. Walking past them seems to mean becoming the music. It vibrates the bones in my neck; I can feel it in my teeth, the deep bass creates little eddies of cool buzzing air as I walk past. (Fieldnotes 1999)

A closer inspection of the preceding fieldnote excerpts suggests that these bodily reactions to the magnitude of the circuit were more significant—or if not more, then at least as equally significant—than any concern about *bonding*. With the devil firmly in hand, even a casual review of my fieldnotes would foreground the effect of that which *goes without saying*. What begins to stand out is the visceral, bodily aspect of how the production value is experience: *How it's possible I don't know, but I get goose bumps again—the hairs on my arms and back and neck prickle; the energy coming from the*

*crowd is palpable; and the beats enter my chest and with every bang fills my lungs—I feel almost invaded by sound—and I can smell the sweat and the boys and the screams and the whoops all over. Indeed, my body does what it will: I can't stop moving; every time they drop their feet to the floor I can feel the noise in my jaw. I catch myself screaming—my hands are in the air. When did that happen?*

Large sporting events and concerts certainly approach and eclipse the size of circuit events and there are many events or institutions implicated in community and identity deformation. These events do not, however, organize a marginalized identity in need of recognition in the way a circuit event organizes a marginalized identity. More to the point, there are few events whose organization of marginalized communities and identities occurs with such bodily intensity. The conjunction of this magnitude and the bodily reaction it invokes cannot be underestimated when it comes to thinking about the specificity of the circuit<sup>7</sup>. What is at stake in the circuit is not merely a concern about community and identity (de)formation; what is at stake is a struggle for social recognition that is experienced or regulated through bodily experience.

### **Conclusion: Analytical Implications**

In this chapter, I have drawn on Bourdieu to actively construct the circuit as an object of analysis rather than passively accept what he calls the trap of the preconstructed object. In light of this construction, two radical rearrangements of the circuit as an object of analysis follow. First, the circuit experience is not merely about—is not isolated to—the dynamics, structure, and meanings of the circuit party proper. Interpretations of what the circuit is, how the circuit is experienced, and the nature of the implications of the circuit for gay men and gay men's communities emerge out of a set of struggles between a broader field of gay history, academic and journalistic pursuits, and the history and structure of the AIDS pandemic as it applies to gay men. Unifying this struggle—the collective work that goes into making the circuit meaningful—are two important assumptions. On the one hand is the assumption that circuit attendance and participation are implicated in gay men's socio-political position. On the other hand is the assumption that reflection on this attendance and participation represents a means of securing gay

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<sup>7</sup> The fact that one circuit event held in San Francisco is called "Magnitude" is suggestive.

men's social position. The circuit, however, raises questions about the notion of the subject embedded in these assumptions: in the face of intense bodily experience, the reflective gaze becomes, at best, attenuated. *I'm short on descriptions for this.* Given that bodily experiences are constituent components of the subject, the challenge is to incorporate—rather than cordon off or dismiss—them into an account of agency.

Second, the importance of that which *goes without saying* becomes particularly apparent (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 231). My initial interpretations gave functional properties precedence over structural properties; I searched for—and found—ways in which the circuit contributed to community and identity (de)formation. With the devil of an insider's status firmly in hand, however, a different sense begins to emerge. The circuit shares functional aspects with gay (friendly) gyms, bathhouses, and nightclubs in terms of community (de)formation, but what remains relatively unique to the circuit are structural properties: the magnitude of the event, its scope, scale, the drama, and a form of entertainment that encompasses the subject.

What is “analytically relevant” about these structural properties is the way they are *experienced* by the subject (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 230). While these experiences are obviously multiple, they are—if anything—intensely emotional, bodily reactions. Being *overwhelmed*, being *scared*, *paranoid*, having *butterflies* and *goose bumps*, taking pleasure in the physicality of dance, pursuing touch for the sake of touch, and the search for and appreciation of forms of entertainment that *literally beats through you sometimes* all suggest a profound bodily experience is at the centre of the circuit. While, of course, not all reactions to the circuit are of this order and while I do not wish to minimize the bodily experience of bathhouses or gyms, commentary around visceral reactions did not emerge as those interviewed discussed their bathhouse or gym experiences. Thus I make the argument that the specificity of the circuit is to be found in its structural properties and the point—the body—through which these properties are experienced. I take this to mean that what is at stake in debates about the circuit are not merely concerns about community and identity (de)formation, but the place of bodily experience in this (de)formation.

A conversation with Brian captures this eloquently:

I sat down with Brian the other night. I needed someone with less of an investment in the questions I'd been posing than I had. I couldn't see past the fact that the circuit was about community and identity—I couldn't figure out how to differentiate it from the tubs or the baths or clubs or any other institution associated with gay men's communities. So I asked him to think about the differences between the circuit and these other institutions—institutions that are quintessentially about gay men's institutions. I've been asking those I interviewed to do this, but never all at once—never in a synoptic way. This time, I asked Brian to write a list of everything he associated with the circuit. Told him to write whatever came to mind. And then I asked him to think about how or if these properties were also what the tubs or gay (friendly) gyms or dance clubs were about for him. So he wrote things down and I asked him to clarify his answers—asking about properties he didn't associate with the circuit. I think he thought I was challenging him on his interpretations. At the time I didn't think I was, but I do remember thinking “this doesn't seem right”. And it wasn't—but only because I was stuck on seeing the circuit in terms of community and identity formation. As I looked at the list he produced, what emerged most clearly as differentiating the circuit from other institutions were things that *weren't* about community or identity confirmation in any clear or direct way: bodies, music, entertainment, testosterone, “the men”, apprehension, production value, losing yourself. This was all stuff that was pretty internal and personal, situated in the *moment* of a circuit event—nothing that stretched beyond the immediacy of the experience. And because I'm so bull-headed, I was left a bit confused. I kept thinking he'd eventually confirm what I wanted to hear—that this was about community and identity (de)formation. But he didn't. A few days later, he came back to me and said he had “theory”. Yeesh, after all my attempts to steer away from thinking about theory, he decided to come to me with more theory. He said that for him, the circuit was about the community stuff—but that what was important was also the fact that “you get to go and see all these great bodies, all these guys, and I love gay men for that. There are gay men who are being sexy on mass in a way that men have not been allowed to be in the gay community. Maybe there was in the sixties and seventies in New York or San Francisco—you're not going to get this thing, this level of ‘wow’, in a small city. You had that huge sexual energy. It died down in the seventies and then AIDS wiped it out. It was over. Done. Gone. You get this squashing down. I honestly think that the circuit came out of that—it's an important part of why the circuit is a success. It's the feeling of being completely overwhelmed. The first time was like “wow”. It was the first time a big beefy guy paid attention to me. The men were better looking than at clubs—there are *great* men at these things. The production values were so outstanding, the guys we met on the dance floor, the three DJs that to my mind has never been repeated, and the laser and light show going off—it was the scale of it all that contributed to that event being that spectacular. There are men with HIV, on steroids, the first time they've had a great

body and they're going to show it off. This is our second go around. This, to me, is my sexual revolution—to see all those guys doing those dirty things—that's exciting. So it's about community and identity for sure—like the tubs and clubs are about that—but at circuit events, it's also about flaunting the body.” (Fieldnotes, Brian 2002)

To *flaunt* the body is to display it or exhibit it ostentatiously. Those who flaunt the body are not, however, *merely* flaunting the body. *Flaunting the body* also suggests a flouting of how the body is used, regulated, or understood and can be read as a resistance—and as such a social struggle. *There are gay men who are being sexy on mass in a way that men have not been allowed to be in the gay community.* At the centre of an experience that is “about” community and identity (de)formation and “about” *flaunting the body* is a struggle for social recognition that takes place through the body and bodily experience. *There are men with HIV, on steroids, the first time they've had a great body and they're going to show it off. This is our second go around. This, to me, is my sexual revolution—to see all those guys doing those dirty things—that's exciting.* More to the point, what is at stake in the debates about the circuit is the role the body—its experiences, its pleasures—plays in community and identity (de)formation.

The circuit experience then, is not something that can be easily understood merely in terms of the circuit party proper, nor is it productive to think of the circuit experience in terms of agency versus structure. In light of this, I make the following argument: the circuit experience might be conceptualised as an intersection between systems of objective relations—“fields” in Bourdieu’s terms—and bodily experience. This conceptualisation necessarily raises different questions about the circuit. Attention is directed away from the circuit party proper toward the relationship between the fields that butt up against or contextualise the circuit and the way bodily experience is used to negotiate through the possibilities and potentials of these fields. As Bourdieu writes, “as soon as you undertake to work on a genuine constructed object, everything becomes difficult [...]. Among those difficulties; there is the question I touched on earlier, of the boundaries of the field” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 244).

In light of this difficulty, Bourdieu raises a pragmatic question: “is it better to conduct an extensive study of the totality of the relevant elements of the object thus constructed or to engage in an intensive study of a limited fragment of that theoretical ensemble devoid of theoretical justification?” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 232). For

the purposes of practicality, creating a manageable project, resources and precision—“as thesis advisors like to say”—he notes that the tendency is to consider “a limited fragment of that theoretical ensemble” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 232). In short, given the constraints associated with research, the analyst is constrained to considering limited fragments rather than the “true” object. The question—indeed the exasperation—that emerges is obvious: if work-a-day concerns about resources necessarily constrain an object so laboriously constructed to some variant of the preconstructed object, then why bother with the effort of thinking relationally in the first place? If one cannot actually use the knowledge produced through the active construction of an object—because it presents an object too broad and complex for analytical purposes—then why bother at all?

Bourdieu answers:

The scientific profit to be gained from knowing the space from which you have isolated the object under study and that you must try to map out even roughly [...] resides in that, by knowing what you do and what the reality from which the fragment has been abstracted consists of, you can at least adumbrate the main force lines that structure the space whose constraints bear upon the point under consideration. Thus you will not run the risk of searching (and ‘finding’) in the fragment studied mechanisms or principles that are in reality external to it, residing in its relations to other objects. (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 233)

Differently, while an active construction of the object of analysis produces an understanding of the social world “only in the form of highly abstract objective relations” that the analyst “can neither touch” nor “point to”, understanding the object of analysis in terms of these abstract social relations is profitable insofar as the analyst becomes aware of an important truth: these abstract relations—and not the object at hand—“are what makes the whole reality of the social world” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 230).

If that which is presented to us is an effect of the relations between and within various social fields or social spaces—if the real is relational and the object of analysis is far broader than might be managed “as thesis advisors like to say”—then the task becomes thinking about the object of analysis in ways that do not abstract it from these larger relations. It is with this task in mind that Bourdieu suggests the analyst “systematically interrogate the particular case by constituting it as a ‘particular instance of the possible’ [...] in order to extract general or invariant properties that can be

uncovered only by such interrogation” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 233). Differently, understanding the object as an aspect of the “highly abstract objective relations” that make social reality possible is to understand the object as an expression of that system of objective relations.

Thus, after the “protracted and exacting task” of actively constructing an object of analysis “little by little, through a whole series of small rectifications and amendments” the analyst is left with the task of analysing the mechanics of the particular object as an aspect or moment of the possible (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 228). The mechanism by which Bourdieu achieves this kind of relational thinking is through “analogical reasoning”. He writes

Analogical reasoning [...] allows you to immerse yourself completely in the particularity of the case at hand without drowning in it[ ... ]. This mode of thinking fully accomplishes itself logically in and through the comparative method that allows you to think relationally a particular case constituted as a ‘particular instance of the possible’ by resting on the structural homologies that exist between different fields. (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 234)

In the following chapter, I use both the notion of the field and that of analogical reasoning to frame the circuit as a particular case or instance of the possible. In thinking about the circuit through these ideas, I can “at least adumbrate the main lines of force”—the objective relations—that structure the circuit (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 233).

What necessarily follows with the use of the notion field are two other equally important terms from Bourdieu’s analytical toolbox: habitus and capital. Together, these three concepts represent a means of explaining action and understanding. More importantly, however, these ideas direct attention to both the abstract, objective relations that make the circuit possible (field, capital) and the bodily experiences (habitus) that seem so central to the circuit experience. Differently, these three notions are well suited to unpacking the specificity of the circuit. The circuit is about a struggle for social recognition carried out through and on the body: it is about community and identity for sure, but it’s also about flaunting the body. The notion “field” is well suited for outlining the genesis of concerns about community and identity formation—the theoretical ensemble which makes this concern a possibility—while “habitus” is particularly



important because it represents a means of foregrounding the body, bodily experience, and embodiment in explaining practice.

# *Theoretical Interlude 2*

## *Reconceptualizing the Circuit*

### **Introduction**

In Chapter 4, I argued that the active construction of the circuit as an object of analysis creates two seemingly contradictory analytical imperatives. On the one hand, by thinking the circuit relationally its boundaries change rather substantially. Not only is it necessary to understand the circuit experience as an aspect of a set of objective relations—Bourdieu’s “theoretical ensemble”—that are much broader than the circuit party proper, but it also becomes necessary to see the circuit as something more than an institution responsible for community and identity (de)formation. What emerges as particularly noteworthy is the way the body and bodily experience are part of this (de)formation. In effect, an active construction of the circuit necessarily directs attention beyond conventional sociological concerns about practice, agency, and structure by introducing bodily experience into this triad.

On the other hand, and in light of the “expanded” scope of the actively constructed object, is the necessity of trimming or constraining this “newly” constructed object. As a particular instance of the possible, the circuit experience is a field that exists in relation to other fields of objective relations associated with the HIV/AIDS industry, Western conceptualizations of pleasure, the dynamics of journalistic and academic

pursuit, and the emergence of sexual identity politics. Any analysis of this “ensemble” is daunting and necessarily requires limits. For Bourdieu, however, the truth of any object of analysis lies in the fact that it is an aspect of this larger ensemble and any abstraction or trimming in the interest of manageability is “devoid of theoretical justification” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 232). Conceptualizations of the circuit currently offered by attendees, critics, and proponents are themselves analytically limited for just this reason: all frame their analysis of the circuit in terms of the circuit party proper—highlighting its structure or the way an attendee mobilizes his agency as a means of practicing through that structure. In the following chapter, I draw on Bourdieu’s notion of field as a means of articulating and analyzing the circuit as a particular instance of the possible.

There are many players in the circuit experience—those who attend the parties, the organizers and producers who organize and profit from them, sponsors who try to find and develop markets through them, the broader communities which host the events, gay and lesbian community organizations with a stake in their effects—in terms of either funding donations or the social fallout associated with a circuit party—and increasingly, academics (particularly health researchers) who see the circuit as a site which encourages poor health choices. While these players have a variety of, at times, competing interpretations of the circuit and its implications, they have one thing in common: all have an investment in the circuit. For a variety of reasons, the circuit is important to these players—either as a means of entertainment, as a site of community and identity (de)formation, as a source of revenue or profit, as an object of study or analysis, or as a health risk.

The nature of this investment is manifest in one of three positions or relationships a subject or organization may have to the circuit experience. At one level are the attendees—those gay men who attend circuit events with the intention or desire to enjoy themselves through dance, socializing, drug use, or the pursuit of sex. At another level is the critic—those individuals and organizations who find in the circuit a set of practices, experience, or effects that are problematic in some sense. Critics from within and outside gay men’s communities argue that the circuit is responsible for promoting unsafe sex, enforcing impossible aesthetic norms, undermining community, and promoting drug

abuse among an already marginalized population. From outside and within gay men's communities come critics whose interests are more clearly grounded in homophobic sentiment—those whose critique of the circuit lies merely in the fact that the circuit caters to gay men. At a third level are proponents—from within and without the gay community—who, in some fashion advocate for, or are sympathetic toward, the circuit as an institution.

As outlined in Chapter 3, these modes of investment are not, of course, mutually exclusive—engagement with the circuit, like most things, is complex and contradictory. Attendees are just as likely as critics to have negative or cautionary assessments of the circuit while critics are as likely as proponents to understand the circuit as a constituent and necessary component of gay men's lives and culture. It is perhaps only the homophobic critic whose rejection of the circuit is coherent or seamless. Indeed, the bulk of those with any investment in the circuit and gay men's communities adopt a middle ground about what the circuit means. The bulk of those with any investment argue that while the circuit brings with it negative consequences, it is also part and parcel of some of gay men's lives and that denying this would be a disservice and counterproductive. It would be equally unproductive to argue that circuit events are idyllic havens of community and camaraderie. In light of this complexity and contradiction, a challenge emerges: How to interpret the circuit in a way that both recognizes this complexity and, more importantly, extends beyond the dynamics of the circuit party proper? Differently, how to recognize this complexity in a way that moves analysis away from fetishizing the preconstructed object? The goal of this chapter is to offer an interpretation that does just that, constructing an altogether new framework of interpretation rather than relying on the tools and notions developed through or in relation to the circuit party proper by attendees, critics, and proponents.

A first step toward the construction of this ground lies in reflecting on the circularity of debates about the circuit. Critics argue that the circuit is problematic and needs, at the very least, to be reconsidered. Proponents and attendees, in different ways, argue critics are blind to what is really important when it comes to the circuit. Attendee, critic, and proponent are committed to establishing a definition of the circuit on the basis of some version of evidence (rates of HIV infection, research linking unsafe sex to drug

use, anecdotes about community formation and friendship). More noteworthy is that this to-ing and fro-ing is interminable in many regards—one definition or interpretation of the circuit based on one form of evidence is met with another interpretation on the basis of another form of evidence. There is, in short, little new that emerges from these interpretive debates. If critic, proponent, and/or attendee do reach any common ground, it merely represents a synthesis of interpretative positions, where the problems to the solutions of the circuit simply rest on recognizing the importance of the circuit to gay men's communities and culture. To borrow from Judith Butler (1990), the interpretive positions of those invested in the circuit represent the circular ruins of a contemporary debate.

The sterility of these debates lies in the fact that the ground upon which these debates rest remains unexplored and uncontested. Without a careful consideration of the ground which informs and constrains the way attendees understand the circuit, a novel problematization of the circuit will remain elusive. A novel conceptualization of the circuit lies in moving away from thinking about the circuit in substantialist terms toward thinking about the circuit as a “particular instance of the possible” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 233). Thus, it is not the circuit that is the ultimate object of analysis. The foci—the true object of analysis, the truth of the object—are “the main force lines that structure the space whose constraints bear upon the point under consideration” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 233). I organize this chapter around offering an alternative means of interpreting the circuit and its effects by considering the grounds and conditions upon which current assessments and interpretations of the circuit occur. By offering this alternative it becomes possible to contribute to other more significant changes—in particular, changes in how we theorize the relationship between agency and structure.

The question thus becomes: How can the circuit experience, as a struggle for social recognition played across and through the body, be situated or conceptualised such that one might “not run the risk of searching (and ‘finding’) in the fragment studied mechanisms or principles that are in reality external to it” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 233)? For Bourdieu, the means to this resistance lies in applying the notion of the field

and the associated conceptual tools—habitus, capital and homology—that follow from this application to the circuit experience.

## **Outline**

In the following interlude, I outline how Bourdieu organizes these conceptual tools, with the intention of applying them to the circuit experience in the following chapter. I begin by offering an outline of Bourdieu’s approach to understanding practice, including where his notions of field, capital, and habitus fit into this framework. In combination, these various elements manifest themselves in a three-pronged analysis—what he calls field analysis. In terms of the circuit, a field analysis raises two compelling questions: In what way is the circuit a field? and What relationship does it have to the field of power? The effect creates a kind of mnemonic device to remind the analyst that the true object of analysis is not the research site, but the broader conditions—the field of power—which make the site a possibility in the first place. In short, a field analysis begins to compel the development of an understanding of the circuit that is sensitive to both a large “theoretical ensemble” as well as how this larger theoretical ensemble—as something that cannot be seen or touched by the analyst—is lived and experienced through the body.

## **Bourdieu’s Sociology of Interest**

At the centre of Bourdieu’s research is a question about the origin and maintenance of social order—the ways in which this order is “produced by indirect, cultural mechanisms rather than by direct, coercive social control” (Jenkins 1992: 104). We regularly, willingly, and generally without full conscious awareness submit to the social orders and meanings presented to us. One of Bourdieu’s research goals is to understand “how stratified social systems of hierarchy and domination persist and reproduce...without powerful resistance and without conscious recognition of their members” (Swartz 1997: 6). To note that order and meaning are produced and maintained without “powerful resistance” or “conscious recognition” is, for Bourdieu, to suggest that explaining order by recourse to objective constraints or subjective will is short-sighted. “To reduce the universe of forms of conduct to mechanical reaction or purposive action is to make it impossible to shed light on all those practices that are

*reasonable* without being the product of a reasoned purpose, and even less, of conscious computation” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 120). For Bourdieu, our forms of conduct—social order—are more effectively understood by shifting analytical focus away from objective constraints and subjective will to a dialectic of the two in human practice. The analyst must “return to practice...the site...of the objectified products and the incorporated products of historical practice: of structures and habitus” (Bourdieu 1990a: 52). The problem of order is thus a question of practice. Bourdieu makes a distinct contribution to social scientific practice by thinking about practice with reference to material/economic resources as well as cultural resources, doing so in a manner that does not simply reduce practice to either subjective will or objective constraint.

“Neither of these one-sided modes of thought can comprehend the ‘intrinsically double’ nature of social reality. Social life is materially grounded and conditioned, but material conditions affect behaviour in large part through the mediation of individual beliefs, dispositions, and experiences” (Brubaker 1985: 750). For Bourdieu, only a theory that is able to conceptualise the relations between external constraint and agency on the part of subjects can be adequate for human sciences. This is hardly contested terrain and few social researchers would argue with the premise that social practice is an effect of a complex interaction between objective constraints and subjective interpretations of these constraints, making it might appear as though Bourdieu sets up a straw man for himself. This has more to do, however, with the level of generality at which the analyst frames the problem. When the analyst thinks about the meaning of “subjective” and “objective” in more concrete or specific terms, then problems associated with the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity become more pressing.

To think about this issue in more concrete terms, Bourdieu draws on many of Marx’s insights, together with the insights and research agendas set out by several social theorists, including Weber and Durkheim (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, Brubaker 1985, Mahar et al. 1990, Swartz 1997). One of Bourdieu’s major adjustments to Marxist approaches to social analysis involves rethinking Marxist economism, “which reduces the social field to the economic field” (Mahar et al 1990: 4). Marxist thought typically adopts a restricted definition of economic interest which is unable to effectively deal with practices that are in no simple way about economic or even material interests.

Economism is unable to account “for the strictly symbolic interest which is occasionally recognised (when too obviously entering into conflict with ‘interest’ in the narrow sense, as in certain forms of nationalism or regionalism) only to be reduced to the irrationality of feeling or passion” (Bourdieu 1977: 177). Bourdieu argues that all practice is oriented toward maximising profit—material or otherwise—or minimising loss, and is thus “economic”. At one level or another and in one manner or another, practice is interested, calculated, considered or directed toward some goal, end, or purpose. All practice is interested “in so far as it is what ‘gets people moving’ what makes them get together , compete and struggle with each other” (Bourdieu 1990b: 88). Bourdieu thus extends “economic calculation to all the goods, material and symbolic without distinction, that present themselves as rare and worthy of being sought after in a particular social formation—which may be ‘fair words’ or smiles, handshakes or shrugs, compliments or attention, challenges or insults, honour or honours, powers or pleasures, gossip or scientific information, distinction or distinctions, etc” (Bourdieu 1977: 178).

In expanding economic interest to cover both material and symbolic interests Bourdieu is also noting that some variants of Marxism are unable to effectively address the role played by symbolic systems, cultural resources, and beliefs in the production and reproduction of social order. The classical Marxist tradition renders symbolic systems in terms of ideology. For Bourdieu, this approach reduces the power associated with symbols and their representations to relations of communication rather than symbolic relations that constitute power relations in their own right. Symbolic systems are not simply effects of material relations. They are also deeply implicated in the ordering of social life, functioning to legitimate the organisation of the social order:

The conservation of the social order is decisively reinforced by...the orchestration of categories of perception of the social world which, being adjusted to the divisions of the established order (and, therefore, to the interests of those who dominate it) and common to all minds structured in accordance with those structures, impose themselves with all appearances of objective necessity. (Bourdieu 1984a: 471, as cited in Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 13)

Bourdieu thus generalises Marx’s analysis of material (economic) relations to the arena of symbolic production and consumption. In making this generalisation, Bourdieu



appropriates and reworks Marxists concepts to create a *sociology of interest* (Swartz 1997, Jenkins 1992, Brubaker 1985).

In constructing a sociology of interest, Bourdieu is arguing that practice is an effect of a subject's negotiation and struggle through—and interest in—material/economic relations as well as cultural/non-economic resources. Practice is thus cultural as well as material. In conjunction with his notion of strategy, Bourdieu's sociology of interest allows him to explain practice in ways that speak to “the ‘intrinsically double’ nature of social reality”. In the *Logic of Practice*, Bourdieu (1990a) introduces the idea of strategy by discussing the way time is conventionally accounted for in the analysis of practice. Bourdieu begins with the premise that everyday practice is organised by a sense of the world, by what he calls a “feel for the game”. The actor develops a sense of the objective probabilities of a social space, and responds to those probabilities with “an overall, instantaneous assessment of the whole set of his opponents and the whole set of his team-mates, seen not as they are but in their impending positions. And he does so ‘on the spot’, ‘in the twinkling of an eye’, ‘in the heat of the moment’, that is, in conditions which exclude distance, perspective, detachment, and reflection” (Bourdieu 1990a: 81). This sense of the world, this “feel for the game”, is the *logic of practice* and it is at the level of *this* logic—at the level of doing—that research and analysis must begin.

Unlike the logic of practice, scientific logic understands practice in a distanced and totalised manner. Apprehending practice through a theoretical framework creates an instantaneous bird's-eye view where practice becomes a complete sequence of irreversible acts. While everyday practice is a series of temporally bounded successions that are potentially open, scientific—what Bourdieu calls “theoreticist” logic—erases and transforms the open complexity of everyday practices into a totalised, closed set of practices. In short to begin with the theoretical logic of scientific models is to objectify practice. “Objectification converts a practical [read: lived] succession into a represented succession, an action oriented in relation to a space objectively constituted as a structure of demands (things ‘to be done’) into a reversible operation performed in a continuous, homogeneous space” (Bourdieu 1990a: 90). To begin with an atemporal, totalised view of practice is to confuse the actor's point of view with the spectator's point of view:

Just as one has difficulty in apprehending simultaneously, as dictionaries do, the different meanings of a word that one can easily mobilize in the succession of a particular utterance produced in particular situations, so the concepts that the analyst is forced to use to give an account of... [practice]...are quite alien to practice which knows nothing of ...[conceptual] relationships such as up and down or dry and wet, nor even with concepts, but with tangible things. (Bourdieu 1990a: 90)

Bourdieu argues that the effect of this is, quite simply, distortion: “The logicism inherent in the objectivist viewpoint inclines one to ignore the fact that scientific construction cannot grasp the principle of practical logic without forcibly changing their nature” (Bourdieu 1990a: 90).

In particular, objectivist models of practice create a puzzle that Bourdieu wishes to overcome: they produce too much coherence where there is none. He writes, “Practice has a logic which is not that of the logician. This has to be acknowledged in order to avoid asking of [practice] more logic than it can give, thereby condemning oneself either to wring incoherence out of it or to thrust a forced coherence upon it” (Bourdieu 1990a: 86). From the position of the scientific logic, where practice is apprehended in its totality and not in terms of its sequential, potential, and open-ended steps, practice is filled with inconsistencies, incoherence, and contradictions. The lived complexity of subjects’ lives, actions, and processes frequently exceed the categories of objectivist models of practice. For Bourdieu this incoherence is not about any incoherence inherent in practice itself. Rather incoherence is an effect of an objectifying theorising of practice in the first place.

From the position of the subject, practice is seldom, if ever, inconsistent. Each step makes sense and invariably works to achieve its ends. Bourdieu is thus cautioning the analyst against “presenting the theoretical view of practice and more precisely in setting up the model that has to be constructed to give an account of practice as the principle of practice” (Bourdieu 1990a: 81). An objectivist mode of understanding practice creates and presupposes distance between practice and its own logic whereas the logic of practice is in the practice of practice. As an alternative to the objectivist model of practice, he advocates developing a “theory of the logic of practice as practical participation in a game” (Bourdieu 1990a: 104). This is to suggest that we can know the logic of practice only through a practical participation in practice.

This is not the same, however, as interrogating the practising subject about “what’s going on”. Bourdieu is sceptical about native theories, arguing that the native’s explanation of practice is comprised of general norms, exceptions, remarkable moves, or an ambiguous vocabulary. “Informant reports likely assume too much and are too general for the kinds of details needed by researchers to uncover the underlying principles of practices” (Swartz 1997: 57). The subject is never in a position where he or she needs to know the overall logic of their practice. Thus, while relying on the voices of natives makes good ethnographic sense, there are two related reasons against relying too quickly on the ruminations and thoughts of insiders. On the one hand, to rely on the terms and explanations offered by the insider is to risk conducting an analysis entirely from within the terms of the field under investigation—it is, in effect, to play the subject’s game. It is an ethnographic truism that all definitions or interpretations—whether on the part of the subject or the ethnographer—are a form of boundary work, representing an effort to maintain a particular configuration of a social field. Bourdieu writes, “Every field constitutes a potentially open space of play whose boundaries are dynamic borders which are the stake of struggles within the field” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 104).

On the other hand insider accounts replace the rules and relationships posited by the spectator with the rules and relationships posited by the subject—merely reinscribing one set of objectified relationships with another set. Bourdieu notes:

Just as the teaching of tennis, the violin, chess, dancing or boxing extracts a series of discrete positions, steps or moves, from practices that integrate all these artificially isolated elementary units of behaviour into the unity of an organized, oriented practice, *so informants tend to present either general norms (always accompanied by exceptions) or remarkable moves*, because they cannot appropriate theoretically the practical matrix from which these moves can be generated and which they possess only in practice. (Bourdieu 1990a: 102, emphasis added)

He argues, for example, that subjects regularly translate practical logic and schemes into norms or rules, for the purposes of transmitting knowledge. For Bourdieu, however, abstracting practical logic from practice creates a bits-and-pieces approach to practice, rather than a holistic approach, producing subjects not entirely attuned to “feel for the game”. To abstract knowledge from practice as a research practice is as suspect as an objectifying interpretation of practice. “Native theories are in fact dangerous not so much

because they lead research towards illusory explanations but rather because they bring quite superfluous reinforcement to the theory of practice that is inherent in the objectivist approach to practices” (Bourdieu 1990a: 102). Informants “readily resort to the ambiguous vocabulary of the rule, the language of grammar, morality and law, to explain a social practice which obeys quite different principles” (Bourdieu 1990a: 102). Because subjects practice only on that which is in front of them, requiring their immediate attention, the overall logic of practice—if there could be one—is never necessary.

The subject who is doing the doing of practice is no better at perceiving the principles of that practice than the observer insofar as these “general norms”, “exceptions”, “remarkable moves”, “ambiguous vocabulary”, or “the ambiguous vocabulary of the rule” are either too vague or too idiosyncratic to offer an adequate account of the logic of practice. Effectively, Bourdieu argues that practitioners do not know the principles of their practice in their totality:

there is every reason to think that as soon as he [sic] reflects on his [sic] practice, adopting a quasi-theoretical posture, the agent loses any chance of expressing the truth of his practice, and especially the truth of the practical relation to the practice... Reflexive attention to action itself, when it occurs (almost invariably only when the automatisms have broken down), remains subordinate to the pursuit of the result and to the search (not necessarily perceived in this way) for maximum effectiveness of the effort expended. (Bourdieu 1990a: 91)

Practical principles are enacted by a practical sense for the game either without actors representing them in any clear way or doing so only in partial or inadequate ways. Practice thus remains unaware of that which governs it.

Thus, the native’s theorizing produces an account of practice that is objectivist—despite having relied on subjective information. In the doing of practice, subjects attend only to that which is in front of them—no more or no less—and the model produced is either too vague or too idiosyncratic to be useful. It is not so much that “native theories” are wrong or incorrect. Bourdieu is sensitive enough not to suggest that the native practitioner doesn’t know what he or she is doing or that he or she is unable to explain what he or she does. He is arguing, rather, that native assessments of practice risk repeating what an objectivist mode of analysing practice already does: setting up norms and rules as that which guides practice, where in fact norms and rules do not exist in this

sense. While objectivist approaches to practice find inconsistencies where there are none, subjectivist accounts of practice are doubly complicated. Not only is a subject's account partial and/or ambiguous, subjective accounts also shore up the objectivist approach to practice by setting up native norms as that which guides practice. In effect the native's rule or norm is an obstacle to the construction of an adequate theory of practice. Bourdieu thus presents the analyst with an argument that details the failure of objectivist and subjective accounts of practice:

Knowing the detemporalising effect of the 'objective' gaze and the relationship that links practice to time, one is forced to ask if it is appropriate to choose between the objectively reversible and quasi-mechanical cycle that the observer's external, totalising apprehension produces and the no less objectively irreversible and relatively unpredictable succession that the agents produce by their practice, that is, by the series of irreversible choices in and through which they temporalise themselves. (Bourdieu 1990: 104)

Choosing between the objectivist models and subjectivist accounts is for Bourdieu, a false choice; one premised on the false antimony social science has set up between subject and object, individuals and society, agency and structure.

Bourdieu argues that there is coherence to be found in practice insofar as subjects are able to negotiate successfully through an infinite number of situations and understand their everyday practice in sequential, coherent, and consistent terms (Bourdieu 1990a: 95). That it is difficult to see this as coherence emerges from the fact that practical logic is organised heuristically rather than by rules or norms. He writes, "Practical logic...functioning in the practical state as an often imprecise but systematic principle of selection, has neither the rigour nor the constancy that characterise logical logic" (Bourdieu 1990a: 102). It "presupposes a sacrifice of rigour for the sake of simplicity and generality" and follows "a 'poor' and economical logic", a logic that does "just enough" to get things done: it is "convenient, that is, easy to master and use" (Bourdieu 1990a: 86). The imprecise, inconsistent, or loose nature of the logic of practice, noted as incoherence at the level of theory or the ambiguity witnessed at the level of the subject's account is thus a characteristic of the logic of practice. It should not be dismissed as an incoherence that we might wring out of it; we should not expect logical logic of the logic

of practice. This incoherence is the quality of practical logic and must be attended to as a part of practical logic.

### *Time and Uncertainty*

Bourdieu reframes incoherence in terms of uncertainty. We understand that things can always have been otherwise. The most ordinary and routinised events presuppose a degree of invention or surprise. This open-ended nature of practice accounts for the incoherence noted in objectivist interpretation of practice and the ambiguity witnessed when the analyst chooses to listen to the subject's account of practice. It also, more importantly, indexes the fact that in any set of practices there is uncertainty. Uncertainty is sufficient to modify not only the experience of practice, but practice itself, for example by encouraging strategies aimed at avoiding the most probable outcome.

“To reintroduce uncertainty is to reintroduce time, with its rhythm, its orientation and its irreversibility, substituting the dialectic of strategies for the mechanics of the model, but without falling over into the imaginary anthropology of ‘rational actor’ theories” (Bourdieu 1990a: 99). Rather than erase this ambiguity through explanation—“to wring incoherence out of it or to thrust a forced coherence upon it” (Bourdieu 1990a: 86)—Bourdieu moves to harness it. He argues that to be truly objective, an account of practice must be able to address the fact that practice “presupposes a continuous creation and may be interrupted at any stage; and that each of the inaugural acts that sets it up is always liable to fall flat and, so, for lack of a response be stripped retrospectively of its intentional meaning” (Bourdieu 1990a: 105). An “objective” account of practice must incorporate the temporal sequence that is practice—which is to say that it must incorporate a sense of negotiation, of strategy. To do so is to be able to account for practice in relation to objective structures of constraint while at the same time allowing for agency.

Bourdieu uses the “canonical example of gift exchange” to elaborate on the way attention to the temporal sequence is able to account for “the ‘intrinsically double’ nature of social reality” (Brubaker 1985: 750). Within an objectivist frame, Bourdieu notes that gift exchanges are understood as practices that ensure cycles of reciprocity and obligation, binding agents into not so voluntary relations of exchange and support. This position assumes a totalised, detemporalised apprehension of the exchange, where gift

giving is understood as an equal back and forth between subjects. He notes, however, that the counter-gift in a gift exchange must not only be deferred but different. To return the same gift immediately frequently amounts to a refusal of the gift and functions to highlight the objective truth of the exchange—that the gift is an obligation. We give gifts and “know” that the counter gift must not only come later, but also be different:

Gift exchange is one of the social games that cannot be played unless the players refuse to acknowledge the objective truth of the game, the very truth that objective analysis brings to light... Everything takes place as if the agents' strategies, and especially those that play on the tempo of action, or, in interaction, with the interval between actions, were organised with the view to disguising from themselves and from others the truth of their practice. (Bourdieu 1990a: 105)

This interval between exchanges, the difference and deferral of practice, is strategy and it is this strategy that accounts for practice. Strategies take place in relation to and within objective relations, and are thus “structured”, but at the same time, the constraints associated with these objective relations are negotiated with the aid of time. It is this interplay between structured relations of power and time that allows for an explanation of agency, and it is with this notion of strategy that Bourdieu is able to theorise “the ‘intrinsically double’ nature of social reality”.

### *Field Analysis*

Bourdieu clarifies the way his notion of strategy accounts for the double nature of social reality and brings the issue of practice to the analytical foreground via the concepts of field, habitus, and capital. With these three core concepts, Bourdieu renders his site of analysis—practice—in terms of struggle, and by implication, social relations: “the stuff of social reality—of action no less than structure, and their intersection as history—lies in relations” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 15). Bourdieu defines the field as:

a network, or configuration, of objective relations between positions. These positions are objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation in the structures of the distribution of species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 97).

The notion of the field functions to delimit a series of relatively independent social spaces with their own values and regulative principles in which agents negotiate their lives. To think about an object of analysis in terms of the concept “field” is to conduct what Bourdieu identifies as a field analysis of that object. This mode of analysis—at once theoretical and methodological—involves three related and necessary steps (Swartz 1997, Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 104, Wacquant 1989).

The first step involves a consideration of the relationship between the field under analysis and a larger field of power. Bourdieu writes, “First, one must analyse the position of the field *vis-à-vis* the field of power” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 105). This starting point represents, in many ways, a mnemonic device: it reminds the analyst of the product of the “protracted and exacting task” associated with an active construction of the object of analysis (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 228). The true object of analysis—what, in Bourdieu’s opinion, is the only scientifically sensible object of analysis—is not the “limited fragment” of the preconstructed object, but the way in which a limited fragment represents a particular instance of the possible. With this first step, Bourdieu is reminding the analyst to think about the object of analysis in terms of the “highly abstract objective relations” that the analyst “can neither touch” nor “point to” but which make “the whole reality of the social world” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 230). Thus at issue is a consideration of how the field is an instance of a larger field of power. A consideration of the circuit “*vis-à-vis* the field of power” means exploring two related questions: In what ways does the circuit constitute a field? And how is the circuit is a particular instance of the possible?

The second step involved in a field analysis represents a means of answering these two questions—which is also to say remaining committed to understanding the object of analyses as a particular instance of the possible. Bourdieu writes that the second step of a field analysis requires mapping “out the objective structure of the relations between the positions occupied by the agents or institutions who compete for the legitimate forms of specific authority of which this field is the site” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 105). Swartz (1997), in a summary of Bourdieu’s thinking, writes:

Research should identify the structure of objective relations between opposing positions occupied by individuals or groups as they compete for [...] legitimation. What are the forms of economic and cultural capital that



are specific to the field under investigation? How are they distributed relative to other forms of capital? This means identifying the dominant and subordinate positions of all the participants in the field. (Swartz 1997: 142)

In a very real sense, Bourdieu's use and application of the notion of the field is, for lack of a better word, modern. The "field"—despite the variation and contingency he imbues it with—is, for him, a tool applicable to almost all social spaces. It is, in short, a kind of meta-narrative that one might apply—with care and attention to actual cases or objects of analysis—in most cases. As such, fields have what Bourdieu identifies as universal structural properties (Swartz 1997). In Chapter 6, I turn to Bourdieu's final step in a field analysis and outline how habitus and field intersect to produce practice.

### *The Structural Properties of Fields*

Fields are, first and foremost, arenas in which struggles for control over resources occur—struggles that, in the end, account for practice. Strategies—hence practice—are the product of a practical sense that “presupposes a permanent capacity for invention, indispensable if one is to be able to adapt to indefinitely varied and never completely identical situations” (Bourdieu 1990b: 62). A subject's strategizing is not, however, without error—within particular fields, some subjects are more successful in their strategizing than others. Bourdieu accounts for these differences through the varying relationship a subject has to material and symbolic resources. Resources represent “forms of capital when they become the object of struggle and function as a ‘social relation of power’ upon which legitimation occurs” (Swartz 1997: 122). Field and capital are intimately connected: the “value of a species of capital hinges on the existence of [...] a field in which this competency can be employed: a species of capital is what is efficacious in a given field [...] which allows its possessors to wield a power, an influence, and thus to exist, in the field under consideration, instead of being considered a negligible quantity” (Bourdieu and Wacquant: 1992: 98). A field then, is more than just a network of social relations. Rather, as a “set of historical relations” it is also “anchored in certain forms of power (or capital)” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 16). Thus, insofar as a field is an arena in which subjects struggle over capital, the first structural property of fields is that they are arenas in which a struggle for legitimation occurs.

Emerging from this conceptualisation is a second related property: “fields are structured spaces of dominant and subordinate positions based on types and amounts of capital” (Swartz 1997: 123). Each position within a field is an effect of an element’s relationship to other elements in a field—not to any inherent properties of these elements. “The struggle for position in fields opposes those who are able to exercise some degree of monopoly power of the *definition and distribution of capital* and those who attempt to usurp the advantages. In general, Bourdieu sees this opposition occurring between the established agents and the new arrivals in fields” (Swartz 1997: 124, emphasis added). Importantly, not only is there a struggle over the resources associated with legitimacy, but also over the definition or classification of what constitutes a legitimate resource:

The relative strength which the individuals can put into this struggle, or, in other words, the distribution at that moment of the different types of capital, defines the structure of the field; but, equally, the strength which the individuals command depends on the state of the struggle over the definition of the stake of the struggle. The definition of the legitimate means and stakes of struggle is in fact one of the stakes of the struggle, and the relative efficacy of the means of controlling the game (the different sorts of capital) is itself at stake, and therefore subject to variations in the course of the game. (Bourdieu 1984: 246)

As arenas of struggle over or through capital—or the definition as to what constitutes capital—fields relations of subordination and domination necessarily characterize fields. It is the relations between these positions—and not what is possessed—that is analytically important.

A third structural invariant of all fields is that they “impose on actors specific forms of struggle” (Swartz 1997: 125). Entry into a field assumes and requires a tacit acceptance of the rules and structures of that field. There is then, despite struggle and conflict, an overall accepted logic, what Bourdieu calls *illusio*: “We have an investment in the game, *illusio*: players are taken in by the game, they oppose one another, sometimes with ferocity, only to the extent that they concur in their belief in the game and its stakes; they grant these a recognition that escapes questioning” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 98). In short, entry into a field depends on subjects accepting the terms of the game, debate, or issue at hand. As Swartz (1997) argues, this conceptualization helps account for the organization—and in particular the reproduction—of any field. Thus, although actors may struggle over and debate the rewards associated with a

particular field, they “nonetheless reproduce the structure of the fields” (Swartz 1997: 126). A final and related characteristic: fields are structured, to a large extent, by their own internal logic—each field exhibits a relative degree of autonomy in relation to other fields. In light of both a field’s *illusio* and its relative autonomy, a significant methodological principle follows. Priority is “given to the *internal analysis* of fields” (Swartz 1997: 128, original emphasis).

Conceptualizing the circuit in terms of these structural properties—following Bourdieu’s second step in a field analysis and mapping out the nature of the struggles that are inherent properties of all fields—raises a series of interrelated questions. What is the nature of the struggle for legitimation within the context of the circuit? What species of capital “function as a ‘social relation of power’” in this struggle (Swartz 1997: 122)? What positions emerge from this struggle? What relations do they have to variations in the composition and volume of capital? What does this arrangement tell us about the internal logic of the circuit experience? How does this arrangement reproduce the logic of the circuit? How and in what way is this logic distinct from other related or contiguous social fields that extend beyond the field under investigation?

The first two steps in Bourdieu’s field analysis and these questions initiate certain “analytical inevitabilities”. On the one hand it becomes very difficult to ignore the broader field of power, the “highly abstract objective relations” that constitute “the whole reality of the social world” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 230). On the other hand, given the links between field, capital, and habitus it also becomes necessary to think about the object of analysis in relation to the notion of habitus. Differently, adopting this method of analysis requires that the analyst consider both the broader field of power as well as the point at which this field of power is lived and experienced: the body. This inevitability folds neatly into Bourdieu’s third and final step in field analysis: “one must analyse the habitus of agents, the different systems of dispositions they have acquired by internalizing a determinate type of social and economic condition, and which find in a definite trajectory with the field under consideration a more or less favourable opportunity to become actualised” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 105).

In Chapter 5, I conduct a field analysis of the circuit experience, focusing in particular on the first and second steps of Bourdieu’s field analysis, considering the

invariant structural properties of fields as a means of outlining how framing the circuit experience as a field can clarify the circuit's relationship "*vis-à-vis* the field of power" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 105).

## Chapter 5

### *Interpreting the Circuit*

I begin, then, by approaching the circuit as a field of interpretive struggle. I do so from two directions and with one intention: to argue that the interpretive struggles that occur within the circuit help perpetuate a system of domination that is, in effect, larger and more complex than the circuit party proper. First, I explore how critics of the circuit—both homophobic and pro-gay—struggle over the meaning of circuit. I point out that the pro-gay critique accounts for practice in terms of the way the subject exercises or fails to exercise agency in relation to the social structural constraints of the circuit party proper. Practice is either an effect of the social structures of the circuit, or a subject's understanding of, or capacity to make choices in relation to these structures. Second, I explore attendees' struggle with *the look*. I note that while attendees understand *the look* as an issue that creates frustration within the self and distance between others, they regularly argue that this is a problem of meaning: the challenge is to work through or find the right attitude about *the look*. In effect, attendees think about their practice in relation to *the look* in terms of effort, will, or agency. I suggest that these interpretations produce more problems than they solve.

What remain unexamined are the social conditions that make the circuit sensible—indeed possible, if we are to accept Bourdieu's ideas—in the first place. I

argue that the homophobic critic's interpretations and power rest on these conditions and by limiting analysis to the circuit party proper, the pro-gay critic helps perpetuate these conditions insofar as they do not come under scrutiny. And while attendees understand *the look* is often antithetical to community or feelings of self-worth, there is a tendency to minimize *the look* as an organizing structure rather than reject it. Minimizing *the look* perpetuates the logic of the circuit by keeping *the look*, as a resource or social relation, in circulation. This contributes to the reproduction of a system of aesthetic hierarchies.

These interpretations also function to perpetuate some rather complex and subtle forms of domination by glossing over an important aspect of the circuit, namely the way in which the circuit is intimately tied to the body and bodily experience. As critics focus their attentions on the circuit party proper—its structures and meanings—they gloss over the centrality of bodily experience. This mode of analysis limits analytical focus to the circuit party proper. As attendees regard the look as an interpretive or symbolic problem—an attendee needs to understand what *the look* really means if he is to negotiate the circuit successfully—attention is directed away from the body and bodily experience to cognitive consideration. And yet, a close consideration of the details and stories of those interviewed suggests the role the body plays in practice is much more complex—deeper one might suggest—than a matter of interpretation or will. I suggest that if this bodily aspect of practice is not taken into consideration, the practice within the circuit—and elsewhere in other contexts—will remain unclear.

To think about the circuit in terms of the broader conditions which make the circuit a possibility and the bodily experience through which this possibility is practiced, I continue with Bourdieu's strategy of field analysis, closing this chapter with a brief discussion of his notion of homology to make this leap from the circuit party proper to the broader field of power.

### **Circuit as a Field of Struggle**

At the centre of struggles characterizing the circuit are questions of classification and definition. While critics argue over the impact of the circuit on community and identity (de)formation, and while attendees debate over the degree to which the circuit is really about friendship or if drug use is or is not a noteworthy component of the circuit, both are engaged in a struggle over what the circuit *means*. The variation in the content

of these debates—such that some seem to be arguing about community development and others seem to be about explaining or justifying pleasure—emerges as differing social fields—and the actors that are part of these fields—come into contact with the circuit experience and the circuit party proper. For critics of the circuit, this positioning is relatively apparent. Writers like Signorile (1997) and Mattison et al. (2001) bring particular interests and tools to bear upon the circuit party proper and are compelled to think about the circuit in terms that attendees may not be inclined to consider. This is to say that the definitional work on the part of researchers or activists—including myself—is contingent on a set of interests that emerge from beyond the confines of the circuit party.

It is certainly the case that the circuit experience, as a field, brings with it a specificity—that there are field specific effects that contribute to these definitional or classificatory debates, particularly for attendees who might have the strongest positive investment in the circuit. As a field, however, the circuit is hardly hermetic. Differently, these interpretations are as much about the specificity of the circuit field as they are about “the main force lines that structure the space whose constraints bear upon the point under consideration” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 233). Thus, while the definitional work of attendees has its origins and concerns within the terms of the circuit field, there are also “main force lines” that come to bear upon this experience. This classificatory struggle is not, however, merely about definition. A struggle over the nature of the circuit—its boundaries—is also a struggle for legitimation on the part of those involved, for a presence in relation to or within the field of the circuit experience. On the middle of a dance floor I still get a small frisson of excitement as someone learns “what I do” and “what I study”; I suddenly become interesting in a whole new way. At the same time, portions of this research allowed me to extend the length of my *curriculum vitae* and I have much to gain professionally by creating a convincing argument about what the circuit “really” is about. This research is, in itself, a moment or expression of this classificatory struggle.

Similarly, as attendees negotiate their way through the immediacy of the circuit party proper, what is at stake is *the amount of attention one gets*:

I'd have to say it has to do with the amount of attention that one gets. And if that's what one's looking for. Yeah, I would have to say that I have come from some parties where I have received attention and it has been nice. And it certainly has been a booster. But I think, sometimes—not all the times—you can come out of those feeling down because you either did not get that or if your desire was to go home with someone and that did not happen. Or no one said “Wow you look great or you look hot.” Or no one touched you. (Ben)

Dale's comments suggest that these negotiations are grounded in struggle:

Sometimes I also find those big parties they can get cliquey. Every big event I go to is always cliquey—there are all these groups of people and they hang out together. All the beautiful people hang out together, all the muscle boys hang out together, and the really big muscle guys hang out together. It's funny. If you know one, it's like you are kind of in. If they know that, then they just welcome you with open arms. But if you don't know anybody, then there's a chance that they will kind of like ignore you completely won't even give you the time of day. (Dale)

In framing the cliquey-ness of the circuit, Dale relies on some fairly specific terms—*beautiful people*, *muscle boy*, *muscle guys*—suggesting that aesthetic markers are major axes differentiating the circuit space. Dale's comments are particularly productive because they point to the issue around which a great deal of attendee's classificatory struggle circulates: how or if *the look* shapes the circuit experience. Frank called this privileging of physicality *muscle isomorphism*. *Muscle isomorphism* is not, of course, totalised or complete. As much as there are those who accept these terms, there are those who argue against value attributed to *the look*. Indeed, some attendees claim that they dance with their eyes closed and are immune to these considerations. As with the struggle between critics and proponents, the contest between those who, more or less, accept the terms of Frank's *muscle isomorphism* and those who reject this standard, is a classificatory struggle. Attendees struggle over what is or is not important—as well as over the implications of this importance—on gay men's communities and identities.

There are then, at least two modes through which a classificatory struggle over the meaning of the circuit occurs. On the one hand are struggles between critics, who are, more or less, negatively invested in the circuit and proponents, who are, more or less, positively invested in the circuit. Here the focus is on clarifying the circuit's role in the (de)formation of gay men's communities and sense of self. This struggle manifests itself in several forms: in the debates between academics, activists, and health researchers and



in the various social relations involved in an event's production. On the other hand are struggles between those who, to one degree or another, negotiate through the meaning of circuit, as they are experienced in the immediacy of the circuit party proper.

Two characterizations of these classificatory struggles are noteworthy. First, in both cases up for debate is what the circuit means. Second, both of these classificatory struggles rely on subjectivist (native theories) and/or objectivist ("theoreticist") theories of the circuit. By using Bourdieu's mode of analysis to highlight how these interpretive struggles operate, I argue against these models. In making this claim it is not my intention to suggest that critics adopt purely objectivist interpretations or that attendees adopt purely subjectivist interpretations. Nor it is to suggest that attendees' and critics' assessments are diametrically opposed; in no way are these groups or struggles mutually exclusive. While Signorile (1997) and Mattison et al. (2001) draw from their positioning in other fields—academic and journalistic—to point out the problems associated with drug use, unsafe sex, and the circuit, interviewees are equally aware that the circuit and what it (might) mean has an impact on sense of self and community. What I wish to do here is explore how current interpretations of the circuit, writ large, rely on poorly theorized or poorly articulated assumptions about the relationship between practice, agency, and structure. In short, interpretations of practice in the context of the circuit rely on either subjectivist (native) theories or objectivist ("theoreticist) theory—or a combination of the two. The intention is to highlight implications of these ways of understanding the circuit—both to argue for new interpretive ground for understanding the circuit as well as advocate for an alternative means of theorizing practice based on Bourdieu's analytical framework.

### ***Critics, Proponents, and the Meaning of the Circuit***

In characterizing critics' interpretations thus far, I have limited my discussion to those critics whose ostensible concerns lie in ensuring the vitality of gay men and gay men's communities. Critics like Mattison et al. (2001), Colfax et al. (2001), Lewis and Ross (1995a, 1995b), Signorile (1997), and, to a lesser extent, the writers and editors of *Circuit Noize* magazine are all, in some fashion, positively invested in gay men's communities. In many ways, these critics are internal to the gay community, if not the circuit experience, and interested in the continuity of gay men's communities and

identities. There are, however, critics who reject the circuit out of a commitment to homophobic and/or normative assumptions about gender and sexuality. The opinions and logic of homophobic critics is readily apparent in the production of a circuit event—at those points where an event production company must interface with a wider social world.

Throughout my research, I had the opportunity to speak to two men who were heavily involved in the production of circuit events. I also spent a portion of my fieldwork working in the offices of a production company responsible for organizing one of the more successful circuit events held in North America. This work was primarily administrative in nature. As a graduate student with nearly no office skills—I found answering the phone a bit of a challenge for the first few weeks—I was nearly overwhelmed by the enormity of the operation. The following excerpt, recorded shortly after I started at a job that had days lasting anywhere from ten to fourteen hours in the weeks preceding the event, outlines the nature of the work as well as my less than noble reaction:

What is still surprising me is the scope and complexity of the event. The day-to-day coordination is a nightmare in terms of calling, returning calls, entering names into the database, sending forms, faxes and packages, calling printers, performers, DJs, dancers, immigration officials for performers from the US, calls from clients, putting together registration material, dealing with the credit card machine, constantly checking to whether what I'm doing is the right thing, muddling through computer glitches, dealing with businesses, proofing copy, calling talent agencies about models, running from one graphic designer to the other, dealing with suppliers over everything from office supplies to furniture to tickets to water to software, contacting sponsors, calling about props and lighting, writing thank you notes, sending out invoices, dealing with accommodations, restaurants, technical people and a million other things. And then I somehow have to be able to make astute observations.  
(Fieldnotes 1999)

My complete and utter confusion aside, at the points of contact between the organization of a circuit event and the services needed to run a circuit event—the contact with the seemingly limitless agencies, organizations, service providers, manufactures, and authorities needed to pull off a dance party—is a point of struggle between value systems and interests. This intersection or interface is, in fact, a point where differing social fields

come into contact with each other and differing interpretations are deployed to make sense of and, in the process police, community and identity practices.

What emerges with particular clarity at this interface is the struggle between the homophobic critic—as external agency—and the proponent—the organizers—of the circuit:

While the interface between a circuit event and the rest of the world—whatever that might mean right now—is relatively minimal, there is a great deal of interface between an event’s organization and various authorities—in the form of state organizations, insurance organizations, venue owners, and other organizations that might be called upon to provide services in the execution of an event. Some of these organizations might (and do) have a negative view of the whole thing—particularly around the whole “gay thing”, but also, I think, around what is appropriate when it comes to pleasure and fun. There are also those who, having some connection to the circuit—those who are gay or who are a bit more sophisticated in terms of health concerns—might have a positive or at least neutral interpretation of the circuit. What holds these critics together seems to be that they have footings outside the circuit experience—it is, in some fashion, not entirely (or not at all) “their thing”. (Fieldnotes 2000)

In the following section, I turn to both interview data and fieldnotes associated with this interface. I raise these experiences not to distinguish the homophobic critic from the pro-gay critic. Rather, I do so as a means of drawing two important parallels between critics—regardless of their stripe or commitment to gay men and gay men’s communities.

On the one hand, critics’ interpretations of the circuit share a similar conceptualisation of practice, one based on weakly theorized and/or articulated assumptions about agency and structure. On the other hand, critics’ interpretations—regardless of their stripe—are either directly homophobic in their orientation or function to support the structures which make homophobic sentiment possible. Raising these points is important for two reasons and relates to the overall goal of this research project. First if one of the goals of this research project is to shift the way the debate about the circuit takes place, then raising the homophobic effects of current conceptualizations of practice within the circuit is useful insofar as it places the efficacy of these conceptualisations in doubt. Second, if a related goal of this research is to contribute to a broader discussion within sociology that moves an analysis of practice away or through

the poles of objectivism/structure and subjectivism/agency, then this represents an excellent test case.

One of my first administrative tasks was to think about a shuttle service for clients:

Craig wanted to organize a shuttle service—wanted to get the clients from one venue to the next. When I was phoning the bus companies I got two negative responses, saying that they didn't want to do anything that involved booze parties or stag parties. I didn't even want to get into a conversation about how this wasn't a stag party. And then when one of the women asked who this was for, and I told her, she paused in a weird way. I have no way to confirm this, but the hairs on the back of my neck stood up and I thought "Is this a gay thing?" Part of me wonders—in that way that comes from having to wiggle your way through homophobic and heterosexist sentiment for your entire life—if this reluctance was about homophobia, mixed in a complicated way, with other issues around being a bit of a tight ass? (Fieldnotes 1999)

This excerpt stands out because it was the first inclination that I had that there might be some resistance to the production of an event of this nature. In reflecting on these notes and the moment, I can recall being quite conscious of thinking about how I would deal with questions about the nature of the production company. I was, I remember, a bit unsure as to what I would say if the person on the other end of the phone were to ask "Who is this for?" or "What, exactly do you do?" In the back of my mind was the recognition that even in this "day and age" there would be those who would pause—even just slightly—at the thought of being involved with the production of a gay event.

Another excerpt began to crystallize and confirm this sense:

Craig was on the phone for quite a while and when he finally got off, he seemed a bit relieved but still tense at the same time. I was mostly lost in the mess on my desk, but when he put the receiver down, I asked what was up. He told me he got a call from the insurance company who was underwriting the events. They were worried as to whether the two parties were "rave things." Apparently, he's been having difficulties with local municipal authorities who, from his perspective, have it out for raves and rave like events. His reply was that it was "a gay dance," which he said "sort of shut them up." He was smart in a way: to call it a gay dance functions to confuse the issue a bit—anyone who isn't familiar with a "gay dance" isn't going to use a rave as a means of understanding the event. I asked him to fill me in on the problems he's had with regulatory bodies. From his experience, the strategy the authorities use is to contact the various licensing offices (insurance companies, the venue, the liquor

commission, the fire department, the health board and other officials) to make things difficult. In the most recent case, somebody with the municipal authorities—the police—contacted the venue owners to somehow put pressure on them to reject the event. The police apparently raised concerns about attendees being messed up or damaging the place. Turns out, however, the venue staff saw this phone call as being more about homophobia than anything else. Similar events—like high school graduations—have been held in the same venue—the same room even—with “people puking all over the place.” And no one batted an eye. What makes the venue staff’s interpretation compelling is that this event wasn’t going to involve the sale of liquor. (Fieldnotes 1999)

If my experience searching for shuttles created grounds for suspicion about homophobia, the preceding excerpt confirmed it: one of the issues at stake at the interfaces of the circuit party’s organization is a complex and subtle manifestation of homophobia. It is certainly not the case that these concerns emerge out of every interaction. Indeed, various agencies, organizations, and levels of government frequently supported and embraced the production company I worked for as well as other circuit events. In the first few pages of the program guide produced for Montreal’s Black and Blue Ball are letters of endorsement from Tourisme Montréal, the Quebec provincial government, and the then Minister of Canadian Heritage Sheila Copps.

Lee suggests, however, that in relation to the Black and Blue Ball, things were not always this congenial. During our interview, he narrated his recollection of the emergence of the Black and Blue Ball:

Robert Vizcena organized the whole party. I have to hand it to him. We weren’t good friends and I didn’t like him for many reasons and he didn’t like me for many reasons. But I really have to hand it to him. He put together the first party and there were probably 400 or 500 people which was almost a regular night at KOX. That was about capacity. And we called it Black and Blue because we felt that it described our feelings, about how all these friends that had died from HIV. This was in 1990. The next year for Black and Blue—1991—Robert pulled the whole thing together again. We were going to have it a KOX and he started selling tickets and the tickets were all sold out days before the event. And so they had to move the event and they had to try to find some place bigger to hold it. And we were having real trouble getting sponsors because nobody wanted to be associated with AIDS at that time. So we had had little gay business and stuff. (Lee)

While Lee is careful to point out that he was a fringe player in this production venture, and stopped participating in 1996—*of course I was nobody. I was just a go-go boy—*

there is no reason to discount the validity of his account. The late eighties and early nineties were hardly welcoming times for gay men—let alone gay men associated with HIV. And while the hysteria surrounding gay men has, of course, changed gay men have yet to overcome it. Indeed, when it comes to circuit events, Signorile (1997) and others point out that endorsements may have more to do with economic considerations than anything else:

The gay rights movement has achieved much over the years though the banalities of prejudice have not been entirely eliminated in society. Still things have changed enough that smart communities recognize they should be so lucky as to have an international gay holiday event choose their town or resort for their festivities. Gay holidays bring big bucks. And what resort or city can afford to scorn the mighty greenbacks? Especially when the attendees are typically well heeled and non-violent?  
(Anonymous 2001: B9)

Endorsement or support mediated through revenue generation is, if anything, contingent. A more sceptical interpretation might even suggest that support mediated through economic considerations does not represent genuine endorsement at all. Regardless of the interpretation, however, what is significant is that at the interface that is a circuit event's production one is likely to experience something few other organizations will: homophobic sentiment.

Other experiences confirm this. During a production meeting, the creative director—responsible for the entertainment and the overall feel of the event—gave a quick review of where things were in terms of his responsibilities:

He gave us a brief rundown on how things were going with his search for dancers for some of the shows. He said he was speaking with a modeling agency and their reactions to his request for models and dancer talent. The talent agency apparently said “Is the show sexual?” The creative director replied: “Well it's a gay and lesbian thing and the guys will likely have to take their shirts off” Her response, according to the creative director, was that she would tell her models not to be involved. (Fieldnotes 2000)

This form of resistance, what amounts to homophobic sentiment, manifested itself in other ways and in other locations:

On another occasion, one of the venues tried to get Craig to control how the models and attendees dressed. They asked that “no breasts or buttocks be exposed in an erotic manner.” Part of me understands how this might have emerged: you go to a circuit event and you are going to see guys

walking around without their shirts. In some cases, it's briefer than that—chaps with nothing but a jock strap, tight leather shorts, skimpy things. And on top of this, if you spend any time watching a dance floor, you're bound to see guys going at it in some fashion or another. Someone always has someone's hands down someone's pants. There was a moment one year where a couple of guys were caught having sex by venue staff and Craig has told stories about seeing venue staff witness this sort of behaviour. They also wanted to station security guards in the bathrooms or have a camera set up in the bathroom—at his cost. It happens: some guys have sex in the bathrooms at circuit events. There was also some concern on the part of the venue about the bathrooms—they were a mess. But that has more to do with the size of the bathroom to tell the truth. And if you have an event with 2500 guys—or suggest that your venue can deal with that capacity—then you'd think the venue would have the capacity to look after that sort of thing. In any event, they were asking for assurances that this sort of behaviour wouldn't happen again and were asking the producers to foot the responsibility for this policing. (Fieldnotes 2000)

Thus in addition to what amounts to barely concealed homophobic sentiment, the interface between event and other fields highlights the presence of normative notions of how and when to experience pleasure. In my fieldnotes, I continued my previous ruminations:

I'm sceptical to begin with, but this felt like a bit of a double standard mixed up with some stupidity on the part of the venue. The event is a closed event—not like anyone is going to go in and be surprised by what they see—and gay men know what goes on in bathroom stalls and are okay with that—especially at a circuit event—and if not, they deal with it by leaving. Christ, gay men at circuit events regularly wear next to nothing at all. Why not just charge the company for the bathroom clean up and leave it at that? I mean they were making a fortune off the rental of the venue space. I suppose I can't prove it, but this smacked too much like about homophobia and erotophobia coming together at the sign of the dollar. (Fieldnotes 2000)

This interface was not always so directly or blatantly homophobic. Craig found himself engaging in a large amount of self-policing in this matter; where no agency, venue, or other outside organization raised direct concerns:

Two of his sponsorship agreements are with a gay lifestyle site that has a strong porn connection—members have access to lifestyle issues like travel as well as a chance to view and download porn—and a telephone chat line that caters to gay men. In so many obvious ways, it makes sense for him to partner with these organizations—they provide Craig with advertising and sponsorship dollars, and Craig provides them with

advertising and clients. At the same time, he's keenly aware of the implications these sponsorship agreements might have on his relationship with other more mainstream sponsors. He asked, mostly to himself, a bit rhetorically. "What happens when I create a link on our website for someone like American Airlines and they see the porn/lifestyle site link and go there? What will happen? Will they pull sponsorship?" Craig is caught in tension: he has to construct the event as a "gay event" with the right imagery, attitude, and possibilities—like sex or at least a blind eye to sex or sex like things at the parties—and in general offer a gay positive event while not offending or turning off those who may not be entirely comfortable with an association with gay men or gay men's culture—particularly any sexual aspect of it. (Fieldnotes 2000)

The negotiation of this tension is not, however, merely limited to the interface between civil authorities, venue owners, or sponsors. It also manifests itself in the interface between the event's production and the communities in which it is situated:

But the relationships with a broader community—things that extend beyond facilities and sponsorship—is more complicated. It's easy enough to keep out those who aren't interested—like straight folks or those who are hostile—with signs. The organizers of the Black and Blue Ball make this clear with simple, straightforward signs plastered throughout the venues: "This Is a Gay Event". At the same time there are also the pressures and demands or whatever of a broader "community" that is out there. (Fieldnotes 2000)

This broader community has several aspects, includes those who may live near the venue, those with an interest in the implications of the circuit and circuit-like events on gay men's communities and identities, and other stakeholders in the circuit—like charities who receive donations from these events. All these constituencies bring certain pressures to bear upon the organization of a circuit event—and not all of them directly or even indirectly informed by homophobia.

Craig charted out some of the logistical problems associated with one of the events he produces, and in the process highlighted the concerns community members raise about having a party in their back yard:

You're hiring a DJ who you know has played everything light and fluffy to play a big old dark and dingy leather party. And you know, big daddies are not feeling like Donna Summer. You know, what I'm saying? Those are all the little tiny things that (pause) or the sound system is horrible and the DJ can't hear. The sound is not powerful enough. Or it's too loud and the speakers are distorting so you're hearing nothing but noise all night. It's too hot. It's too cold. It's too crowded. It's not crowded enough. The



venue's too big. There are two thousand people here, but the place can really hold four thousand people and they haven't divided up the space properly. Or the coat check line. You got inside but there's an hour and half wait to check your coat. We'll let you in and you have to pay a hundred dollars, but we have no coat check for you. So (pause) I mean there are a bazillion things. And not only the set up, but the politics and everything involved with the production are of epic proportions. I mean it takes a week to set it up and a week to take it down. And the people who live around the venue hate it—the noise, the crowd. Or in the case of an outdoor venue, the portable bathrooms are out there too long and we're ruining their view and there's always one person that doesn't want to go to the party and wants to sleep that night. You know what I'm saying? There's always something. Now, there is less resistance on the part of the community to this last party I was involved with because of the money. Half the money goes to charity—a gay and lesbian service organization—and the other half of the money goes toward improvements within the community—like infrastructure. So, now part of the proceeds actually goes into the community, so the nay-sayers are really not as vocal as they once were when all the charitable proceeds went just to the service organization. (James)

Aside from comments on the logistics of setting an event up, James's comments are useful for revealing an important dividing line when it comes to how critics understand the circuit. On one side are those critics who have either a negative—or at best a neutral—interpretation of the circuit while on the other are critics who have a positive interpretation of the circuit—or at least of gay men, gay men's communities, and the needs, interests, or challenges of gay men.

For example, as James's comment alludes to, some circuit events contribute portions of their revenue to various charities—many of which are gay and lesbian community organizations with interests in stable funding:

A few years ago, the service organization took a lot of heat from the event. What happened was people started dropping from overdoses when I was involved in the production with the head person that had been doing it since its inception. And that year we had a lot (pause) it was a very hot and people danced without taking water breaks and so we had a lot of heat exhaustion compounded with drugs and stuff like that and we had three overdoses. And the overdoses were highly publicized and so the next year, with all the press around it, the service organization just couldn't take any more pressure because they had people of stature on their board of directors, and when they looked through their money out in the corporate world they realized that they couldn't have this kind of publicity. (James)

Given that these gay and lesbian community organizations are frequently attached either to or are in themselves an AIDS service organizations, any concerns are magnified:

And on top of the drugs is the criticism that, well here you are producing parties where, you are aware that most of the people are on something and when they leave the party, they're all fired up [horny] and they go [home] and they have a big [orgy]. [And the organizations couldn't condone that] (James)

Here, James refers to an organization which has become critical of the circuit out of a concern for the health of gay men and the vitality of gay men's communities. It is, of course, the issue of drug use and its intersection with (un)safe sex with which many pro-gay circuit critics—particularly those with an interest in gay men's communities, identities, and health—grapple.

The following quote from Manny Lehman, a popular circuit DJ, touches on this:

As great as the circuit is, and as overwhelmingly popular as the events are, the partying sometimes goes to an extreme. I don't want to preach about it, but I've noticed during several recent parties that there were an immense amount of overdoses - of people passing out - whether it was from GHB, dehydration, or exhaustion. There just needs to be a lot more control on that [...]. There are going to be ramifications somewhere along the line for the community, the parties, or the cities where these things continue to happen. For example, Palm Springs, which is basically a very conservative city, may decide somewhere down the line that even though the White Party generates a large amount of revenue, it's just not worth the liability or trouble if too many medical emergencies occur during this particular weekend. Or look what happened in Miami, where the parties stop at 5:00 a.m. now. We don't know how much of that had to do with excessive partying and frequent overdoses. I just think we have to pull it back a little bit, get in control, and watch our friends. We may even have to be a bit of a scolding mother to our friends who we see misbehave, telling them to pace it up - to take it easy. You can have a good time and go to new levels of nirvana, but please don't overdo it. As a DJ, a club promoter, and a fellow human being, I am concerned about the community nationwide. Until more major events are taken away from us — like Morning Party on Fire Island was a couple of years ago — some people may not stop. But then it will be too late. We just have to be careful and watch our friends.<sup>8</sup>

Here, Manny Lehman raises warning flags around the relationship between medical emergencies and the closure or restriction of circuit events at the hands of authorities and

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<sup>8</sup> <http://dancemusic.about.com/library/weekly/aa060500-4.htm>, January 31, 2002

calls on attendees to *get in control*. Others raise similar concerns around overprogramming—the number of events offered during a circuit weekend can be very extensive. Over the course of four days—especially with the larger, more established productions—it is not uncommon for as many as eight different parties, between six and ten hours long, to be offered. Invariably, questions about the dangers associated with trying to attend too many events emerge:

Many poor kids just play and play and not eat and sleep and go totally wild with these events. Health and sensibility are thrown out the door with some and totally ignored. I know people who have danced and not slept at circuit parties for 48-72 hours. Arg! So many of us work so hard and maintain our bodies to a high standard only to ignore them at some events to the point of deadly consequences. Is it all really worth it?<sup>9</sup>

Another concern:

Where does the accountability begin with promoters and events that offer one marathon event after the other? I used to not feel this way...but there is an element involved in the party that needs to be regulated. And for some twilight zone reason, they have become the standards and norm that others try to follow and keep up with. Hard to accept, but it is true.<sup>10</sup>

Another attendee summed this up neatly: *If I'm criticised for my excessive drug use, then shouldn't the promoters be condemned for their excessive offerings?* Implicit in these comments is the understanding that the length or the number of circuit parties might lead to a host of difficulties associated with exhaustion, illness, or drug abuse. What is worth noting is that these debates and concerns—or variations on them—are raised by Mattison et al. (2001), Mansergh et al. (2001), Colfax et al. (2001), and Lewis and Ross (1995a, 1995b) in more rigorous scientific settings while Signorile (1997) raises them in journalistic contexts.

Pro-gay critics—whether attendees or health officials or both—assume and adopt the same logic in their critique: individual agency and structural constraint have a role in the (health) practices of attendees and the way these (health) practices inform and affect sense of self and community. For pro-gay critics, analyses based on straightforward notions of agency and/or structural constraint lead to rather straightforward solutions. On

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<sup>9</sup> <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/circuitpartyinsanity>, December 15, 2000

<sup>10</sup> <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/circuitpartyinsanity>, December 15, 2000

the one hand are those who advocate behavioural monitoring and modification on the part of attendees. *I just think we have to pull it back a little bit, get in control, and watch our friends. We may even have to be a bit of a scolding mother to our friends who we see misbehave, telling them to pace it up - to take it easy.*

On the other hand, those who place more emphasis on the structural effects of the circuit proffer other equally predictable solutions:

Even though Mattison et al. is not finished with his research, he has already thrown his two cents into the party-respectability ring, making innovative suggestions to party producers. One idea is a “Health Fair”, a quieter area of the party where men can take a break from their K-holes and bump borrowing to wander among vendors hawking wares mostly in the health department [...]. The other idea Mattison et al. had was to create a clean and sober counter part to the larger circuit parties. ‘What about having an alternative venue in one of the rooms not being used for people who choose to be clean and sober for the night? I’m not taking necessarily about people in recovery, just people who want to in an environment that promotes being clear headed.’ (Flicker 1999: 58)

During a health summit at the Black and Blue Ball in 2001, panellists made similar arguments:

Dr. David Ostrow from Chicago was up next. His first point centered on the relationship between the structure of a circuit event or week and how changes in this structure might induce different health outcomes. He noted that there is a rhythm to the week and to the night (a point that Drew Mattison et al. made in his presentation as well) and that if the structure of the week or event changes, then we could expect changes in the outcomes. (Fieldnotes 2001)

When those sympathetic to gay men’s communities—either attendees or those who have some investment in gay men’s lives—begin thinking about the impact of the circuit on gay community and identity (de)formation, explanations for practice—and solutions to solve the challenges that emerge from particular practices—rest on notions of agency and/or structural limitations. There are too many choices and attendees need to learn to make better choices and/or structural constraints compel certain kinds of practice. Ultimately, the main problematic lies in figuring out and addressing the connections between practice, structure, and agency.

The interpretations of “outsiders”—loosely speaking—like venue owners and authorities are obviously grounded in homophobic sentiment and are less than productive

when it comes to understanding gay men's communities. Critics, like Signorile (1997), Manny Lehman, attendees posting on email newsgroups, and Mattison et al. (2001) are, arguably, concerned with the viability of gay men's communities. In short, these pro-gay circuit critics are, at the very least, sympathetic to gay men and gay men's cultures while venue owners are less so. The efficacy of the solutions offered and the analytical possibilities that follow from pro-gay critiques are, however, suspect at best and, at worst, have much in common with their homophobic counterparts.<sup>11</sup>

Flicker (1999), in commenting on Mattison et al.'s (2001) research, concluded his article by raising a question about efficacy: "Of course, as everyone reluctantly and perhaps embarrassingly acknowledges, the hardcore circuit boys are not too thrilled with this idea of the 'community dance'" (Flicker 1999: 73).<sup>12</sup> I asked Sam what he thought about the prospect of changing the structure of an event for the purposes of encouraging different (health) choices. He responded:

It's nice I guess if it's a simple dance. A circuit event—people expect at least eight hours of partying. I don't like events that end at 2. I just can't get into the night. I like a night that's long. I don't care what time it is, but I need eight hours of partying [laughs]. I'm perfectly happy if the tea-dance starts at 6, goes till 10 and the next one starts at 10 and goes till 2. Then I've had my eight hours. I'm fine at 2, take me home. [If you change that] it's no longer a circuit party. (Sam)

While Sam's response supports Flicker's (1999) doubt by raising questions about the efficacy of such a strategy, it also helps to reveal an important analytical issue. When Sam thinks about changes to the structure of a circuit event, he immediately touches on one of the aspects comprising the specificity of the circuit—its scope, size, scale.

Without the magnitude, a circuit party is *no longer a circuit party; it's just a simple dance*. Making structural rearrangements to circuit events may lead to a reduction in HIV or overdoses, but doing so reveals nothing about the specificity of the circuit—its *magnitude*—and the relationship between this magnitude and the practices which constitute community and identity. In short, magnitude of the circuit event and the way

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<sup>11</sup> This is not to suggest that pro-gay critics are homophobic. This is to suggest that the effect of pro-gay critiques that rely on simplified notions of structural constraint or (faulty) choice function to perpetuate a larger order that has its roots in homophobic sentiment.

<sup>12</sup> At the time of Flicker's (1999) article, Mattison et al. (2001) had yet to publish his findings—although the research was underway.

attendees experience this magnitude at the level of the body is what distinguishes the circuit. The interpretations of critics, unfortunately, gloss over this importance. It is at this point—the body and bodily experience—that the pro-gay and the homophobic critic meet: the homophobic critic works to deny the possibility of bodily experiences while the pro-gay critic glosses over the centrality of the body and bodily experience and/or threatens to constrain this experience:

These events are ways of celebrating particular ways of being gay, and if these roadblocks are about homophobia (and some puritanical ideas about sexual behaviour) then an entire community's opportunity to engage in this celebration is threatened. But even if it's not directly about homophobia, it is certainly about pleasure. This is fundamentally about a form of policing: how to enjoy yourself, under what circumstances, what is appropriate—and it all circulates around a consideration of what some men do with their bodies. (Fieldnotes 2000)

As the pro-gay critic denies the possibility of particular bodily experiences, s/he draws from and legitimizes an already established normative understanding of the body.

Pro-gay critiques come into such close contact with the homophobic critiques due to pro-gay critics' weakly conceptualized notion of practice. Pro-gay critics' interpretive frameworks—and the solutions emerging from these frameworks—rest on theoreticist theory or, to a lesser extent, subjectivist notions of practice. The analytical implications are important: framing the circuit as a set of structures that shape practice or to think about practice in terms of agentic choices in relation to this structure is to think about the circuit in terms of the pre-constructed object—a mode of analysis that overlooks the “main force lines that structure the space whose constraints bear upon the point under consideration” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 233). Differently, pro-gay critics base their interpretation of the circuit on an explanatory model that, in effect, decontextualizes and fragments the circuit as an object of study by limiting analysis to the particular dynamics—agency and structure—of the circuit party proper. The effect is to reproduce the logic of this larger field: “searching (and ‘finding’) in the fragment studied mechanisms or principles that are in reality external to it” functions to contribute to the replication of this larger structural field (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 233).

The explanatory framework of homophobic critics relies on the “main force lines” of a broader homophobic sentiment. By denying or glossing over the body and

bodily experience, the classificatory debates of pro-gay critics function to replicate or reproduce an already established hierarchy that privileges some ways of exploring and using the body over others. The explanatory framework of pro-gay critics forecloses certain lines of inquiry and in doing so, limits the possibility of analysing these same main force lines of heterosexism. It is in this manner that pro-gay critics' interpretations are doxic in their orientation. If we are to take Bourdieu at his word, if we are to think in relational—that is in sociological terms—then it is these main force lines that are ontologically prior and should be the point of analysis (Gergen 1990). The task, for Bourdieu, must be to “adumbrate these main force lines” that make the object of analysis a particular instance of the possible (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 233).

### *Attendees and The Look*

To think further about the adumbration of the “main lines of force”, I turn to a second moment or mode through which the classificatory struggles of the circuit are most apparent: struggles that take place in immediacy of the dance floor experience. In particular, I focus on struggles over *the look*. Like critics' interpretations, attendees' interpretations also rely on either subjectivist-native and/or objectivist-theoreticist analyses of the circuit, making a link between *the look*, the circuit experience, community, and identity. Ben's comments neatly crystallize this connection:

I think it's about a very loose sense of community. We like the music, the dancing and I think the visualisation. Everyone is body focused. I think gay men are especially body focused. Or at least a large segment of those of us who go to these parties are body focused. And I think that's why we go—the fun, the music, but also *the look*. At times it reaffirms our sense of community, who we are—our likes or our dislikes—in some respects and that's a positive thing. (Ben)

As an idea or experience, *the look* represents a major axis through which the circuit is experienced: *the look* helps reaffirm *our sense of community* and *who we are*.

As much as the circuit—particularly *the look*—reaffirms *our sense of community, who we are*, it also functions as a means of marking *our likes or our dislikes*. *The look* marks degrees of membership. Recall Bill's particularly candid comments:

Personally, I wouldn't have as much pleasure going into an event like that if it were filled with fifty percent of fat men or overweight people. I wouldn't get off on that. (Bill)

This comment was intriguing and made its way into subsequent interviews. When asked what he thought about Bill's "fifty percent" comment, Dale replied:

To be honest that's a turn off to me because I always like men who are in good shape. It's appealing to the eye. And when you see it—to me it's impressive. And I feel that a lot of circuit people are like that. They put in a lot of effort and they deserve to be there and to be noticed; to be admired, to be looked at. It's like a car show—in the sense that you go there to check out other cars. It's like going to a candy store—you go to check out the candy. (Dale)

Thus, while the circuit may indeed be about friends, it is also premised on receiving certain attentions—to *be noticed*, *to be admired*, *to be looked at* on the basis of *the look*:

Part of it is I work my ass off at the gym to look good. I know at these parties there are going to be other guys who look good. I wanna see them. I wanna know that they want me. A big part of it is a reflection of that I fit in and that...I think a big part of it is getting affirmation for me and getting attention. I thought I had something more profound to say. There's a huge attention component for me. A huge thing for me is attention. It satisfies that need to be watched and touched and ogled. I love when I walk by somebody and they go "Wow, look at that one." That's it for me, right there, that's what makes me go. (Alex)

Having *the look* allows for a certain kind of circulation in the circuit's economy of pleasure: *to be watched and touched and ogled*. Peter's words offer another excellent example:

I hate that steroids are not natural but on the other hand I'm one who loves to look at these beautiful guys and if the steroids have gotten them to that place, then so be it. And I'm sure everybody who sees them goes, "Oh, a steroid body." But you know what? Look at them. They're *beautiful*. If that's what it took them to get there, then so what? (Peter)

While "venerate" would be too strong a word, Peter's comments strongly suggest that *the look* invokes a certain adoration. *Look at them. They're beautiful. The look* then, functions as a way of positioning some subjects in relation to others, such that those able to approximate *the look* occupy a more legitimate social position within the circuit's aesthetic hierarchy of value. Those able to approximate *the look* have legitimacy within the circuit that those who do not will never have. Andy is even more candid—without *the look*, one gets nowhere; *you are out of the group*:



Circuit events for me—especially in Miami and LA—are very body conscious things. When you don't have the body, you are out of the group. (Andy)

This refusal—a form of exclusion or violence and hence struggle—takes place with more or less direct expression and more or less reflection.

Bill directs this refusal internally as he prepares for and thinks about attending a circuit event:

It seems like for me the only thing I don't feel decent about is my tummy. As much as I like tummy on other men I don't like it on me. So when I know I'm gonna go to an event and where I'm gonna take my T-shirt off, my tummy has to be—not necessarily flat—but to a size that I don't mind having. So I will never go to a dance all night after a dinner (Bill).

There is seldom outright rejection and rarely a direct attack on those who do not conform to *the look*. Selection and policing are subtle and polite—a touch refused; a smile of acknowledgement but a move in a different direction as one negotiates the dance floor. No one checks body types at the door. When asked about unwanted advances while dancing, Bill noted:

I try not to be rude. So I try to give them signals that I am not interested or I turn around or I do things, but it's pretty rare that I have to be rude with people and really express myself with words and say okay, "Piss off" or "Get lost". (Bill)

Despite, however, what amounts to a genteel form of boundary maintenance within the circuit experience, the value of muscle is clearly present and dominant. Kyle recalls how those without—or perhaps less of—*the look* can receive a degree of direct hostility:

I'm also just thinking of friends that are built and stuff and they are rude to people that are not built like them. I've seen it—they are rude to people. Let's say a not attractive guy is going to come and say hi to one of our friends or something and he just disses him or something. Very rude. (Kyle)

Sam notes that this refusal or exclusion may not necessarily be aimed directly at the "offending" subject, but shared among friends:

I mean I've seen people there who were like 55, probably, at circuit events. And I don't really have a problem with it. You know—I don't have a problem with what anyone does, but some people say "Oh God that's gross" and stuff. (Sam)

Thus, as an arena in which attendees, critics, and proponents struggle over *the look*, the circuit experience necessarily brings with it differentially related positions of domination and subordination.

This struggle not only positions subjects socially in relations of subordination and domination, but also spatially. Lee's commentary highlights how *the look* plays out on the contours of a dance floor:

You can really see the line cutting down the middle. The hot boys are definitely in this corner and not-hot boys are definitely in this corner. And if the not-hot boys move into this corner, then the hot boys move out. So there is still an elitist thing, about trying to fit into that hot boy corner. When will I get there? It's an aspiration—and I'm not so sure again how noble the aspiration is. And I think some people go out of confidence and some people go from a lack of confidence. Some people go because they feel good about themselves and they feel good about putting themselves on display and they want to have a good time. (Lee)

In the matter of *putting themselves on display*, Alex is particularly conscious and confused about the effects of not having or being able to approximate *the look*:

I wonder. Do people go there to look? Sometimes I'll be there and it seems that some of these people just come to look at all the body guys. I often wonder looking at it, "Do people come here to look at the beautiful guys?" I mean, people kind of line up in different areas, and watch people flow through and back and forth from the washrooms to whatever. And it's like they're observing everybody, like a lot of people seem to be there as observers. It's kind of like they want to see everybody that's there. Sometimes I wonder, "Does that not make them feel uncomfortable? Going there and knowing that they don't fit in?" Like when I was in NY, kind of on the outside and I thought that maybe that I shouldn't be going to these things, like this isn't my scene. I dunno. Like I felt even in New York, I kind of felt, even though I didn't have the best time and I didn't fit in, I still felt like I fit in or I'd be all right. (Alex)

Andy expressed some discomfort at the thought of others watching him in this fashion:

I don't like to be cattle in a cage that is watched. Sometimes people that don't fit in are just watching the crowd and getting turned on by it. And it's rude to say because not everyone is lucky with their looks and their body and can change it. But sometimes I see real fat people, and I mean real fat overweight Americans. And I get the idea that they try to almost to jerk off on other guys. And I just don't like it, but that might be rude to say. (Andy)

What I believe is significant here are the implications that might be taken from Alex's and Andy's comments about *the look* and the process of looking. Alex's confusion about those who appear to *just come to look at all the body guys* begins to suggest that those who may not be able to approximate *the look* are, in some sense, barred from participating in the circuit in a meaningful way.

When Andy attends, he is doing more than looking—his participation extends beyond *just watching the crowd* due to the legitimacy he carries. An excerpt from my fieldnotes:

Part way through the night, a guy seemed to show up out of nowhere—he was fully clothed (a bit weird given where we were) and just totally not of this place. He just stood there, in the middle of us, just slightly in from the edge of the most active part of the dance floor's border. He was wearing a loose purple rayon shirt, jeans, a bit of a comb over (!) His behaviour was all wrong. He just stared and stared and stared—rotating every now and then to change his viewpoint. He wasn't dancing as much as he was traveling through the crowd on a sight-seeing tour. And it wasn't an appreciative glance he was giving—it was simply a gawk, one that almost seemed to be about ownership or being a tourist. Later Brian said, "He had no concept of personal space." And it's true, he wasn't engaging with the people around him in a way that made sense—no attempt to say hello or treat the dance floor as a dance floor. It was weird because he wasn't getting it or something. And while this is certainly the case—it was creepy—I have to admit that it was also about the way he was put together—shorter, a comb over, a bit dumpy, fully clothed, not the right body type. (Fieldnotes 2001)

And by a bizarre coincidence, I bumped into the same individual the following night. And while I certainly can't take a great deal of pride in my reaction this second time around, it is telling of the way in which *the look* figures into how attendees experience the circuit:

And then the guy from last night seemed to pop up out of nowhere. How does this happen? There are 16,000 people here. He was wearing the same thing too—rayon shirt open to the waist, a comb-over, loose tan pants. Again, he just stood there and stared at whoever—really intently—it was a bit invasive. Brian turned to me and said, "Hey it's the guy from last night!" I turned away and forgot about him. (Fieldnotes 2001)

Indeed, *when you don't have the right body you are out of the group*. Alex's comments are particularly poignant in this regard:

In Toronto I was finally part of the circuit. I felt like a real circuit boy, not in a cheesy way, but I had made it to the A-crowd. I mean comparing Toronto to the Black Party in New York, I felt like nobody noticed me. I felt like I was on my own, like I was there by myself. Sometimes I felt like I was dancing alone in the midst of a million guys. And I was thinking, “What is this? Doesn’t anyone find me attractive?” But at this party in Toronto I felt like—this sounds so shallow—I felt like I was top choice grade A beef and that everyone wanted a piece of me. Suddenly everybody who had never noticed me before was noticing me. At one point I walked into this one area of the dance floor and five guys were fondling me and going “Oh my God, this guy is the most beautiful guy.” And I was going, “What the fuck is this?” And I remember thinking, “I’m not worthy of the attention that I’m getting.” (Alex)

At stake is a desire to be *part of the circuit*. Marc put a very fine point on the issue when I asked him about the considerations that run through his mind as he makes preparations: *Am I going to get laid or felt up or recognized or noticed?*

### **The Look as Capital**

Within the confines of the circuit, attendees struggle for a kind of presence, search for some force or effect in its structure, a struggle *to be noticed, to be admired, to be looked at*. This struggle for legitimacy is about attaining a particular position for those who are able to approximate *the look* as a kind of resource. To have *the look* is to have some purchase in the field, to be able to move through a circuit event and feel that one has a legitimate place within its structure. Within the circuit experience, *the look* functions “as a ‘social relation of power’ upon which legitimation occurs” (Swartz 1997: 122). In Bourdieu’s words, *the look* represents a species of capital “which allows its possessors to wield a power, an influence, and thus to exist, in the field under consideration, instead of beginning considered a negligible quantity” (Bourdieu and Wacquant: 1992: 98). I take this to mean that one of the major stakes—if not *the* major stake—within the circuit is that of social recognition. In this sense, the circuit can be understood in terms of a field, as an arena of struggle for legitimation that positions individuals in subordinate and dominant positions.

In a very real sense, *the look* threatens to fracture any notion of community and sharing—a point that is well understood by attendees. Those interviewed—and attendees in general—are conscious of *the look* as a major axis which structures the circuit experience, often with negative effects on one’s sense of self and any notion of

community. During interviews, this understanding manifested itself directly, as in the case of Marc and Peter:

Yeah, well, like I said, I've had experiences like that because with my friend—he's not really come out and said that, but he's not comfortable and it upsets me because I'd like him to share those experiences. That is something that I'm not happy about. I mean look at us: we're at the gym twice a week with a trainer that we pay \$35 an hour for and we have gym memberships and we're watching what we're eating and all that kind of stuff. Why? Is it to have a richer or more enjoyable healthier life? No. What if we didn't go to parties? What if we enjoyed going to the beach with our friends or went to art galleries and we didn't do the circuit? Would we be on such a regimen? I don't think so. I think we would be happier where we are. Parties are very body conscious. Very very very. (Marc)

Everyone wants to look good for each other. Yeah, for sure. What guy doesn't go to the gym before he goes to a party? I mean I knew I was going to Miami and for a month before I made sure I worked out before I went. I mean I always work out anyway because I wanted to look good. (Peter)

Alternatively, Frank and Dale do not place quite as strong a point on this issue as do Marc and Peter. They argue that community and bonding occur despite the value or hierarchy associated with *the look*:

There's a real bonding, if you're there with guys twice the size of you or half the size of you, it doesn't make any difference. It's the fact that they're all gay men together in a big room. I love that bonding element of it. (Frank)

It's true. It's a bond. I will be dancing with my friends and some big guy three times my size will look over and give me a smile and knowing that he is as happy as I am to be here and as happy as me to see him. So there's a bond there. We're here to have fun. And it doesn't matter what size they are, it doesn't matter your background, it doesn't matter who you are or what you look like. It's all [about] being there, supporting the whole entire community, and wanting to have fun. (Dale)

Both Frank and Dale's argument could be read as a testament to the power of the commonality or the sameness of the circuit community—*size doesn't make any difference; it doesn't matter what size they are. It's all [about] being there, supporting the whole entire community, and wanting to have fun.* At the same time however, as interviewees argue that for them *the look* does not matter—they also suggest, implicitly, that *the look* does matter for some. In the midst of bonding, some attendees find fractures

or cleavages—a kind of sibling rivalry in what one attendee called a *sense of brotherhood*.

What is particularly important about Frank and Dale's comments about *the look* is the way in which they struggle to reclassify or frame the role and weight of *the look* in relation to the circuit: *it doesn't make any difference*. Thus, as much as attendees struggle over possessing and approximating *the look*, they also struggle over the classification and definition of *the look*, reflecting on what *the look* means, on what *the look* is, and on how *the look* “really” fits into the circuit experience. Unifying these classificatory struggles is an attempt to soften or lessen the effect or the notion of *the look* in determining how attendees might experience the circuit. For example, Scott links the approximation of *the look* to an exercise regimen that necessarily has health benefits:

At the same time I think the statistics prove that people that are healthy and fit live a better life longer. (Scott)

Similarly, Dale argues that approximating *the look* is a means to develop self-confidence:

The circuit kind of motivates you to go [to the gym] and work harder because you know that once you get there you will thank yourself for working hard, because all the people will compliment you on the good work you put in. They do compliment you. They will admire you for your hard work, and this kind of helps you to feel less insecure and have more confidence to go out there and meet more people and make new friends and speak out and speak your mind and you don't have a fear; you have more self-confidence in yourself. (Dale)

Here, the pursuit of *the look* brings with it the opportunity for self-development, future potentiation, and overall improvement of the self.

The meaning and value of *the look* were also something attendees attempted to mitigate through the notion of variety:

I'd say the majority of the people who attend circuit parties are out of shape. And it's true. There are a lot of hot guys, but when you think in terms of sheer numbers and how many people go and how many people are in really awesome shape, the majority is still average. Totally. Not everyone is in super shape. There are a lot but what does it is that every picture you see advertising or on the net or whatever—well of course everyone wants to take pictures of the hot guys and that's what gets posted on these things. So that's the image that happens. The reality is that most people are in average shape. (Peter)

I have to say there is a tremendous emphasis on looks on body fat percentage, whether one has the tits and the pecs and the arms. That is certainly a large component of things and it can be an aspect that makes you feel uncomfortable. But I've seen anything and everything at the events. (Ben)

The suggestion that the circuit actually contains a great variety of body types—and consequently that *the look* is more a stereotype than an actuality—was accompanied by the suggestion that a good experience at a circuit event depended on having the right attitude. Thus, on the basis of this variety, attendees are able to argue that the body and *the look* are only:

part of the equation—it's dancing and the friendships and everything else that happens. And we party with overweight people and people that don't fit that circuit party mould. (Marc)

Sam echoes Marc's assessment. For him, the body is only

part of the equation. At the beginning it was a larger part of the equation for me than it is now because at the beginning that's what you see—the overpowering image is this sea of hot muscular boys, right? And later on, as you get to talk to them, get to know some of them, get a feel of the event you realise that so much more of the party is all the other things that are going on—and it's not so much the body—it's not all that's there. I mean, yeah, the beautiful image is nice, but it's not all that's there. It's having fun. (Sam)

The challenge is to come to this understanding. This sentiment is apparent as Sam reflects on the hypothetical prospect of attending an event with someone who didn't feel comfortable with the way they looked:

I would tell them to hang around with us and go to have fun with their friends. And for some of them it's an impetus to do something about how they feel. If you don't feel comfortable about how your body looks then do you feel comfortable in other places? Or is it just because it's more brought to your attention here? If it is, then maybe come with us to the gym and we'll show you some of our workouts or something. Or if that's not important to you at all, then don't worry about it. Just come and have some fun with us. [The body] is part of the equation. (Sam)

For John, the right attitude means having a certain confidence in oneself:

I had never worked out. I would say I was fat. And my boyfriend was a well built boy, but he didn't look through me and I had my shirt off. I wasn't insecure about myself, I didn't care. I took off my shirt because I

felt good. And I didn't care what anyone else thought. And if someone is going to judge me I don't want to be part of their life. (John)

Some attendees argued that an overdetermined understanding of the weight and role of *the look* in determining the circuit experience was an effect of an attendee's (faulty) perception rather than reality. John argued that any aesthetic hierarchy was an effect of what:

people put in their head. I've seen older guys—all in the middle of the dance floor and I look at the guy and think I hope I can be out there having as much fun as he is when I'm at that age. Because he's just having fun. That's what I like to see. So people do establish a hierarchy, but really I don't think there is one that exists. (John)

Based on seeing variety at a circuit event, Marc argued a similar point:

I know that a lot of it is perception. You got a guy there who is fifty-something years old and he's having a great time, and he is fit but not buff—well part of the reason he's having a great time is because he's allowing himself and he doesn't give a shit. And he's there for the music and he's there for friends and whatever. (Marc)

Thus, while attendees recognize that people *do establish a hierarchy* on the basis of *the look*, it is possible to avoid or side step this fact as long as one has the will power and wherewithal to forget or reassess the value of *what other people* think.

Marc followed this assessment with a seemingly contradictory argument that shifts responsibility away from the subject:

And I don't know that the community that goes to the circuit parties is *consciously* exclusive, but just by virtue of the type of guys who go to these events, there is an exclusivity that blocks other people from being comfortable from being there. But I certainly don't think that's a conscious thing. (Marc)

One does not *consciously* exclude on the basis of *the look*—it merely happens. Marc is, of course, aware that this differentiation—that which *blocks other people from being comfortable*—can give rise to negative assessments of the self. This became more apparent in a later assessment:

So it's upsetting to me when I see people being excluded, but I also know I'm exclusive. When I'm there at party and I'm horny, part of the whole thing is to find someone you think is beautiful and see what happens. And if you don't think they're beautiful you don't hang with them. It's not



necessarily a bad thing—you're not intending to be exclusive—but it is certainly an effect that happens. (Marc)

In light of this negative self-assessment—*it's upsetting to me when I see people being excluded, but I know I'm exclusive*—Marc struggles to account for or mute the impact of *the look*. Note here that Marc speaks in the passive voice, unhinging himself from any agency in the matter—it is *an effect that happens*. The point is not to single Marc or Marc's story out. Rather, I use Marc's ideas to highlight one of the ways attendees struggle over the meaning and implications of *the look* and its relationship to social differentiation. Here, the effect of *the look* is mitigated by reducing the role of personal agency: it is a structural effect: it is *an effect that happens; I don't think that's a conscious thing*.

An alternative classification of the meaning and value of *the look* emerges when attendees reflect on those who are deemed to take *the look* too seriously:

It's not a gold and fast rule that a hot looking muscle guy is going to be rude to you. But it does happen, but I think that would happen anywhere in any gay nightclub. If someone is tough and knows what they want and that's what they go for and they don't care about what others feel—well they'll do that at a circuit party, they'll do that at a night club, they'll do it walking down the street. That's just the person they are. I think it's the personality. (John)

For John, those who adhere too closely to *the look* are lacking in some psychological or emotional regard. Other means of defining and classifying *the look* rest on the argument that attention to appearance and presentation of self is not unique to the circuit—*it's everywhere*:

The argument I have with myself is: “Is it unhealthy to look this way for these events? Or is it okay?” And it's not just a gay thing—it's a societal thing—its Brittany Spears and Madonna and you know, buff and yoga and slim and that kind of stuff. Those are our ideals—to look healthy, fit, popular, wealthy—all of those things that are kind of respectable—that's what it looks like. (Marc)

I mean, that's been going on for centuries for women right? Like the skinny waist and the big boobs and blah blah blah. (Alex)

Yeah, but it's outside the circuit party though. It's everywhere; that feeling is everywhere. It's more *apparent* in the circuit, but it's everywhere. (Scott)

With the effect of *the look* being felt everywhere attendees are able to normalize any hierarchy based on *the look*. The notion that this exclusion is in some sense a normal, understandable, and expected, but unfortunate effect is particularly clear in Dale's assessment:

Birds of a feather flock together. When you spend five hours at the gym, when you have created this body for yourself, you will look for some people who have put in as much effort as you. If I'm going to put this much effort I want to be around people who are the same as me. My hard work will pay off in the end. If your friend is good at tennis and you're good at tennis, you want to play with someone who is good at tennis. To me, that's how it works. If you party on the same wave length as somebody, you want to party with them because you are on the same wavelength—it could be the physical aspect, could be the mental aspect, it could be personality aspect. Different people hang out with different groups for different reasons, for some kind of aspect, some common interests. (Dale)

When I pressed Dale a bit further, asking whether his experience of *birds of a feather flock together* was about rejection based on *the look*, he continued:

If you see a steroid monkey he only hangs out with other steroid monkeys. They are so big—they're huge—and they are all very attractive guys, but they are always surrounded by other guys like them. They see common interests. They think, "You look like me. I look like you. We should hang out together, because we do the same thing". It's just closer to home—that's the way I see it. (Dale)

When asked to account or explain for this, others relied on similar assumptions about the naturalness of this arrangement:

There's always a patch of those boys. But that's because of what they're attracted to. So they want to be around people they are attracted to. But there is interaction between different groups. I mean we go and hop through there and chitchat with those who we know and don't necessarily feel excluded. You know, each person, they're looking for what turns them on. Sure there are islands of people who are the same. Sure. But it's like any other place. The 19-year-olds hang out with the 19-year olds. That's what they do. We hang out with our "peeps." (Marc)

Here, Marc uses community—being with one's people—as a means of explaining and justifying hierarchy, splits, and fractures in an experience that many argue overturns boundaries through bonding: *it doesn't matter what size they are, it doesn't matter your*

*background, it doesn't matter who you are or what you look like. It's all [about] being there, supporting the whole entire community, and wanting to have fun.*

These classificatory struggles are diverse in their logic and emerge through a variety of social intersections. As attendees engage with the circuit, with themselves, with their bodies, and with each other different interpretive possibilities emerge. Some are more sensible than others at given moments and under given pressures. From the perspective of an analyst, the multiplicity of these negotiations may lead to questions about their consistency. For example, one might wonder about the tension between an argument that suggests attendees need to understand and accept that *the look* is only *part of the equation* and an argument that suggests exclusion around *the look* occurs regardless of intent—you're not intending to be exclusive—but it is certainly an effect that happens. One might also wonder, for example, about the contradictions embedded in the argument that *the look* leads to self-confidence. In some respects, this is difficult to deny: having *the look* affords one with a degree of self-confidence or self-esteem. This link is not, however, straightforward or direct:

When it comes to me, I still think I'm not big enough. Say you go to a gym or a club and there are 100 people and you think of yourself as a seven out of ten—which is good. But then you only look up to number eight, nine, and ten. You never look back; you always look up and think “Oh I want to be like that.” But already 80% of the club already looks up to you, but you don't notice that because you don't pay attention because they are not your crowd. (Andy)

Self-confidence is not so easily—or permanently—gained through any approximation of *the look*. *The look* is, in Dale's words, just as likely to decrease self-confidence and compel one to spend more time considering and constructing *the look*:

I think everyone at a circuit event is somewhat insecure because they know that around the corner there will always be someone better than them. And that makes them work harder. (Dale)

For the analyst, these contradictions may in themselves represent puzzles worth analysis: How do seemingly antithetical arguments exist in the same social space?

### **Minimizing the Look and the Logic of the Circuit**

If, however, we take Bourdieu's theorizing seriously, these contradictions are not in themselves effects or qualities of the object of analysis or evidence of a subject's

incoherence. Rather they emerge as an artefact of analysis. Attendees seldom, if ever, experience their negotiations or struggles as contradictions. Representations and assessments of *the look*—subject’s practices in relation to *the look*—are productive and emerge “logically” from a set of real lived experiences. Moreover, because subjects are seldom in a position to see their practice laid out in front of them—synoptically, in Bourdieu’s terms—it is unlikely different negotiating strategies will be brought close enough to each other to reveal contradictions. Attendees make their negotiations “‘on the spot’, ‘in the twinkling of an eye’, ‘in the heat of the moment’, that is, in conditions which exclude distance, perspective, detachment, and reflection” (Bourdieu 1990a: 81). Negotiation—in effect, practice—is guided by a feel for the game, a feel based on the embodiment of the objective structured relations—the possibilities—of a given field. Subjects improvise, resist, and revise their way through these objective relations with the aid of time and uncertainty. As a result, practice has a just so logic, a “certain vagueness”:

Our perception and our practice, especially our perception of the social world, are guided by practical taxonomies, oppositions between up and down, masculine (or virile) and feminine, etc., and the classifications produced by the taxonomies owe their effectiveness to the fact that they are ‘practical’, that they allow one to introduce just enough logic for the needs of practical behaviour, neither too much—since certain vagueness is often indispensable, especially in negotiations—nor too little, since life would then become impossible. (Bourdieu 1990b: 73)

Thus, in their negotiating through objective possibilities—in their practice—subjects express the contradictory “‘intrinsically double’ nature of social reality” (Brubaker 1985: 750). In these terms, the analytical priority lies not in challenging the validity of classificatory struggles. Rather, it rests in understanding this intrinsically double nature of reality.

We might begin unpacking the intrinsically double nature of the circuit by reflecting on the nature of attendees’ interpretive energies. These interpretations are united by the notion that attendees need to properly position *the look* in the grand scheme of the circuit. The right attitude—how an attendee deals with the value of *the look* in both himself and others—neutralizes *the look* as a structuring aspect of the circuit experience. One only has to have the will to do so—a variation on “get over it.” Importantly,

however, these interpretive strategies operate on the basis of accepting or at best minimizing *the look* rather than negating it. As attendees struggle against each other and within themselves over how to understand *the look*, none of these interpretations involve a disavowal of *the look*—it is always, more or less, part of the equation. There is struggle or debate over the meaning of *the look* and its implications for the circuit experience, but there is no question that *the look* is worth considering.

When Scott and Dale argue that approximating *the look* accrues health benefits, both accept the value or role of *the look*. Claims about the variety of body types operate in a similar manner: as attendees soften the impact of *the look* by suggesting that there are many body types found at a circuit event, they do not refuse or overturn *the look*. Variety merely means that a hierarchy based on *the look* is more complex rather than non-existent. To argue that *the look* is only part of the equation—or that some suffer from faulty perception—also functions to maintain the aesthetic hierarchy through a similar complication or addition. There is more to the circuit than *the look*, but *the look* is still present. To make the claim that those who adhere too closely to *the look* are psychologically suspect assumes the individual's reaction or interpretation of *the look* is problematic rather than the value system itself. And while arguments about structure certainly absolve a subject from any ill will, the effect is to confirm *the look* as a structuring factor of the circuit experience. Thus while the meaning and value of *the look* is open to interpretation it still remains a central structuring axis.

This practice of minimizing—but not negating—*the look* functions to maintain *the look* as one of the major stakes—if not the major stake—at the centre of the circuit experience. In short, *the look*, as a resource or social relation—as a kind of capital—that structures the circuit remains in circulation under tacit agreement. This has a significant effect: insofar as attendees agree on the stakes of the circuit, these minimizing strategies help reproduce its logic. In particular, minimizing strategies represent the mechanism through which differentially related social positions are established and maintained. Thus, as attendees negotiate through—and minimize—*the look* they replicate the circuit's aesthetic hierarchy through “indirect, cultural mechanisms rather than by direct, coercive social control” (Jenkins 1992: 104). In short, these strategies represent means by which the stakes of the circuit—social recognition granted on the basis of physical

capital—are secured. It is at this point that Bourdieu’s third structural characteristic of fields becomes analytically useful. Recall that for Bourdieu by accepting the stakes of the field in their struggle over it—either in its possession or in its re-interpretation—subjects replicate and reproduce the logic of the field.

The classificatory struggle upon which this reproductive logic rests brings with it another effect: minimizing strategies also trivialize the body and bodily experience. Differently, strategies based on a reinterpretation of *the look* background the body and bodily experiences in favour of how attendees *understand* the body. Cognitive considerations supersede the body and bodily experiences, rendering *the look* in terms of a relatively straightforward problem of meaning. While all those interviewed struggled to locate *the look* in its “proper” place, none, however, argued that the circuit was not, in a fundamental way, about *the look* or that *the look* was not central to the circuit’s economy of pleasure. I take this as an indication that *the look* is more complex than a matter of interpretation—it is more than a symbolic “problem”. That the body and bodily experience—and not merely the understandings attendees have of *the look*—are central axes of the circuit is particularly clear in Alex’s statement:

I’m bothered by people who say it’s all about the cookie-cutter body and that it’s a bunch of cookie-cutter guys going to these things. It kind of bugs me. In some ways it’s true. But that to me is part of the judgements of circuit parties. I think those judgements about circuit parties come out of the fact that it’s a jealousy thing—they’re just doing that because they are jealous. (Alex)

Not only does he agree that *in some ways it’s true that it’s all about the cookie-cutter body and that it’s a bunch of cookie-cutter guys going to these things*, but Alex also relies on the body’s centrality as a way of rationalizing or dismissing the critique offered in the first place: people are making the judgement that the circuit is about the body *because they are jealous*. Jealous, one might presume, because they do not embody a very real and powerful image. Later Alex is more candid and less defensive:

What scares me about the whole circuit thing is the fact that it seems to be a lot body centred, it’s a sexual body thing—yeah. I still see it as kind of (pause) to me a big part of it is all about the body and the pretty boys coming together and meeting each other. I don’t think I’ve stepped away from that. I think people feel that they don’t have the right body type, because I think it’s a real body culture or it can be for some people. I can

see that other stuff is going on—the friendship and the camaraderie—but I don't—it sounds so bad—but I don't get why they are there. (Alex)

Alex is an intelligent man—thoughtful, able to reflect and comment upon the limitations posed by what he calls the *body culture*, and clearly aware of the negative effects it can have. *What scares me about the whole circuit thing is the fact that it seems to be a lot body centered.* No amount of interpretation, however, seems to have solved this dilemma for him: *I don't think I've stepped away from that.* For attendees to frame the circuit in symbolic terms—to treat *the look* as a problem of interpretation—and argue that the challenge is to come to a better understanding of this symbolic universe glosses over the way this symbolic system is connected to the body and bodily experience. The look is not merely understood—it is lived and made real through the practicing body. Thus, deprogramming from the “cult of masculinity” is more complicated than reflection—it would necessarily mean living the accretion of *the look* as the body in a whole new way—it might even involve a re-living of the body. Here, we see that the body has facticity—an ineffability—that resists reinterpretation and reinscription on the part of attendees.

An alarming manifestation of the ineffability of the body and bodily experience appears in Peter's account of unsafe sex. During our interview, it became apparent that, for Peter, sexual pursuits were becoming central to his circuit experiences. In his mind, this change brought with it an increase in the amount of unsafe sex he was having, which was *the height of unsafe* at his last party. I asked him about his most recent experience:

Actually it happened in the bathroom—in one of the stalls (uneasy laugh). That one strikes me the most because I feel really dirty and really not good about it. Because uh, oh man, we were (pause) okay, there was this guy and his boyfriend that I had met earlier in the weekend. This was in Miami. So I was dancing with him and his boyfriend. And then later when his boyfriend went away for a minute he goes, “Do you like my boyfriend?” And I go “Yeah, he's cool.” And he goes “So the three of us could...?” He wanted the three of us to (pause) [have sex] and I said, “Yeah that's cool.” We were running low on drugs, we were on our bare minimum, so his boyfriend went out into the masses on the dance floor to try and find their friend to get drugs. So while he was off doing that, me and him snuck to the can and did the remaining coke and I fucked him in the can bareback. And we went back out and his boyfriend came up and kind of said, “Oh there you guys are.” That was *so* weird. That was *so* weird. (Peter)

I subsequently learned that neither Peter nor his partner had condoms with them and I asked if he thought having them on his person would have made a difference:

No, not really. Just because we were both like animals—we both wanted it so bad. (Peter)

Russ: So in your own head at the moment, were you thinking, “I should be using a condom?”

Yeah, I was, but at the same time I was thinking, “Fuck this feels so good and this was one of the most exciting moments ever.” It’s because I like it. And they like it too. And they want it [pause] and I do too. A little bit. It definitely feels better without. (Peter)

In Peter’s assessment is a relatively conventional account of unsafe sexual practice: the desiring and pleased body overcomes the mind or rational choices. Here, passion, desire, and pleasure drove both he and his partner to a place where unsafe sex became inevitable.

Given Peter’s emphasis on pleasure, I asked if his unsafe sex had to do with condom fatigue. The claim that condom fatigue—a frustration with the prospect of having less pleasurable safe sex at every sexual encounter—has increasingly become a means of accounting for risky sexual practice. He replied:

No. Not at all. It’s just a conscious decision that I’m making. Because bottom line is that it feels better and I enjoy it more. As far as twenty years of preaching condoms—well, no; I think, obviously there is not enough of it because we are still there doing it without knowing everything that’s out there, never mind HIV just an STD. (Peter)

Thus, while Peter begins with a relatively conventional explanation—he and his partner were both *like animals*, controlled by an overriding desire for pleasure—his subsequent reflections move against this interpretation. In fact, Peter’s reflections suggest a rather rational calculative approach to his experience—*bottom line is that it feels better and I enjoy it more*. Pleasure did not over ride him; he made a conscious decision to attain a particular pleasure. Given that Peter explains his actions in terms of a *conscious decision*, I asked if this had anything to do with the roles he adopted during sex. Receptive anal sex represents a stronger risk in terms of HIV transmission than insertive anal sex and I wondered if this knowledge entered into his calculation.

Russ: Would you let other guys fuck you bareback?



I would say no in a million years because I usually only get fucked twice a year—it's like a bath; you have to have it twice a year whether you need it or not. I would say never, but it happened twice at one of the parties I went to. I couldn't believe it. I feel more safe being a top. Being a bottom I don't—I'd be really freaked out if I was getting fucked without a condom as a bottom. But it didn't really freak me out because even though it happened twice, it was very short both times; I was having sex for about an hour at the hotel and they couldn't get hard-ons anymore to do anything. So I thought if they couldn't get hard, then there's no way they were going to come. So I wasn't really too worried—but it's not something I would ever want to start doing—it's the first time I've ever gotten fucked without a condom. That one I did with definitely a lot more [as a top] thought than fucking without a condom. (Peter)

It is not as though Peter or his partner's passion and desire overwhelmed their capacity to choose or make decisions. Indeed, Peter explicitly recalls reflecting on his experiences: *it's the first time I've ever gotten fucked without a condom. That one I did with definitely a lot more thought than fucking [as a top] without a condom.*

I continued along this line of thought, trying to get a sense of how or if Peter's capacity for choice was compromised by a body in pleasure. Did he think his unsafe sexual practice was due to the fact that he was too high? Peter replied:

I wasn't really. I was high, but it wasn't where I didn't know what I was doing. (Peter)

Peter subsequently detailed other unsafe episodes and I revisited this question, asking if these experiences with unsafe sex were an effect of drug use. He replied:

No not really. Not really. I've always known. A lot of it does happen during a party weekend, when you go home and stuff—but even though I've had drugs in my system I've never not known what I'm doing. It's always been—I still know what I'm doing—I still know I'm having sex without condoms and it's not because I've had any drugs in my system. (Peter)

Thus in addition to pointing out that his choice to not use a condom was a *conscious decision* or something he did *with definitely a lot more thought*, Peter's own analysis of his practice resists commonly held notions that drug use leads to unsafe sexual practice. Peter is unwilling to blame his drug use for his actions—that is, the pleasures and euphoria associated with being too high are not something he uses to explain his unsafe sexual behaviour. For Peter, the body—and its passions, inflamed by drug use—are not part of his account.

It is not as though Peter is unable to assess the profound implications of some of his sexual practices:

Wouldn't that be a shame? To have this life-altering thing to happen to you for ten minutes in a washroom stall with someone you don't even know and will never see again. That's horrible. That is absolutely horrible. (Peter)

Peter is merely unwilling to rely on either animal passion—or not rely on animal passion entirely—or drug use to explain his practice. When pressed to account for his practice in the bathroom stall in Miami, he continued:

It was more about, "I can't believe I'm doing this." And just the dirtiness—I don't really want to use that word—just the fact that I was fucking someone in the can was kind of a turn on, it really was. I'm like, "Wow I can't believe we are doing this right here." (Peter)

In the face of a pleasurable experience, but unable to rely on animal passion or drug-induced euphoria as explanations, Peter's analytical gaze becomes inert. He reaches a rate-limiting point where understanding in the face of pleasure ceases, where his gaze meets opacity: *I can't believe I'm doing this; Wow I can't believe we are doing this right here*. He is aware of the danger, but his gaze does not penetrate his own actions in any analytically productive way. Peter does not learn anything about why he acted as he did because the experience, the pleasure, does not register as meaningful. Thus, in Peter's case (at least), not only is the relationship between practice and the body contradictory—the body and bodily experience do and do not direct action—but Peter's analytical efforts find their limit at the edge of pleasure.

Here then, as with Alex, is the body's ineffability. To make this claim is not to suggest that the body drives the mind or overdetermines rational practice. It is to suggest something slightly different: in the face of bodily experience, the mind fails to understand. In the face of pleasure, the body becomes weird: *That was so weird. That was so weird*. Peter's word choice is analytically evocative—the Oxford English Dictionary defines weird as "strange" or "incomprehensible". Both Alex and Peter's pleased bodies present them with an ineffable facticity that leaves experience strange or incomprehensible, as something that resists interpretation and change: *I can't believe I'm doing this; I don't think I've stepped away from that*. These reflections suggest that the body and bodily experiences are matters "deeper" than interpretation; *the look is*

more than a symbolic problem. Without attending to the body's ineffability, Alex and Peter's practice—and the practice of many others—will remain either simplified or mysterious. In short, focusing on the meaning of *the look* represents a kind of misrecognition—a mode of thinking about the circuit that prohibits an engagement with what is central to the circuit: the body and bodily experience. Without this in mind, any analysis is limited to a circular set of debates about what *the look* does or does not mean.

## Conclusion

For Bourdieu the struggles characterizing social fields are not merely struggles for the appropriation and possession of various forms of capital, they “are simultaneously symbolic struggles to appropriate distinctive signs in the form of classified, classifying goods or practices, or to conserve or subvert the principles of classification” (Bourdieu 1984: 249). As much as social fields are characterized by struggles around having and not having (access to) particular goods or resources, social fields are also characterized by classificatory struggles over how resources are understood or what counts as a resource. Thus as much as the circuit involves struggles over the possession of capital as a means of securing social recognition, the circuit is also, fundamentally, a contest over the terms of this struggle. In this chapter, I have tried to approach the circuit from a particular analytical or interpretive angle: in terms of Bourdieu's concept of the field, choosing to highlight two kinds of classificatory struggles—those between critics and proponents of the circuit and the struggles attendees engage in as they try to come to grips with *the look*. In doing so I have argued that as much as the circuit may be interpreted—and experienced—as a means to bonding, sharing, or brotherhood, it is also possible to suggest different, less rosy, contours.

Recall that one of Bourdieu's overarching interests lies in understanding how forms of unequal social organisation persist without powerful forms of resistance; that is, he is interested in how systems of inequality are legitimated without recourse to overt violence or control. Throughout his writing, Bourdieu argues that there are two means whereby social legitimation is secured: overt violence or symbolic violence—what Swartz (1997) calls “a form of symbolic manipulation” (p. 82). Overt violence requires direct and daily work “to produce and reproduce conditions of domination which are even then never entirely trustworthy” (Bourdieu 1977: 190). Systems of symbolic

violence do their work with the complicity of all those involved, where both the dominated and the dominating accept social differences as natural, necessary, or unavoidable. “Symbolic violence, to put it as tersely and simply as possible, is violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 167). Here Bourdieu configures violence broadly, as those actions or processes that locate subjects in hierarchical or unequal social structures. It is this latter form of legitimation that Bourdieu is most interested in understanding. This is to say that symbolic systems, as much as economic or material systems, function to justify and secure order.

Symbolic violence depends on a subject’s relationship to various forms of capital. Recall that capital—of any kind— “allows its possessors to wield a power, an influence, and thus to exist, in the field under consideration, instead of being considered a negligible quantity (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 98). Symbolic violence emerges when the structure and nature of various forms of capital is misrecognized, where the structure and nature of a subject’s relationship to capital is elided and understood as uninterested. The effect of this misrecognition renders that structure and nature as necessarily so, rather than as a “cultural arbitrary”, as a constructed phenomenon. Thus, misrecognition functions to transform “arbitrary relations of exploitation (of women by men, younger brother by elder brother, the young by the elders) into durable relations, grounded in nature” (Bourdieu 1990a: 112). Processes of misrecognition make violence possible or sensible—and therefore more secure—insofar as the arbitrary and interested nature of social relations is understood as natural, necessary, or inevitable.

To be in a position where the arbitrary and invested nature of capital is misrecognised as natural is to have what Bourdieu identifies as symbolic capital. “Symbolic capital, a transformed and thereby disguised form of physical ‘economic’ capital, produces its proper effect inasmuch, and only inasmuch, as it conceals the fact that it originates in ‘material’ forms of capital” (Bourdieu 1977: 183). Elsewhere, Bourdieu writes, “capital becomes symbolic capital, that is capital endowed with a specifically symbolic efficacy, only when it is misrecognized in its arbitrary truth as capital” (Bourdieu 1990b: 112). To misrecognize capital’s material forms is to euphemise the interest—and thus the struggle—associated with that species of capital. It

functions to legitimize struggle-as-practice as natural and therefore necessarily so. “Activities and resources gain in symbolic power, or legitimacy, to the extent that they become separated from underlying material interests and hence go misrecognised as representing disinterested forms of activities and resources” (Swartz 1997: 90). Symbolic capital allows a subject’s influence and existence in a field to appear naturalized, as something that “goes without question”. Such naturalized relations contribute to the reproduction of the relations in which they are embedded insofar as there is no other way of conceiving the world. It is on the basis of such logic that the social order is maintained.

Struggles over what the circuit means and how the look fits into the circuit experience are part and parcel of how a larger normative order is maintained with little recourse to overt control or violence. As the homophobic critic rejects or tries to constrain the circuit experience, he or she denies certain practices and experiences on the basis of a belief that those practices and experiences are inappropriate. At the very least, this rejection or distaste is based on normative notions of the pursuit of pleasure and sociality. Alternatively, the pro-gay critic argues for a rearrangement or reconstruction of the circuit on the basis of a desire to secure the future of gay men’s communities and lives.

In making calls for a rearrangement of the circuit, the pro-gay critic necessarily denies or condemns certain experiences or practices connected to the circuit. In doing so, he or she comes to support a larger normative order by accepting the argument that there is an appropriate, healthy, or otherwise more productive means of pursuing pleasure and sociality. I suggested this overlap between homophobic and sympathetic critics emerges from the pro-gay critic’s poorly articulated account of practice, an account that focuses on the structure of the circuit and/or the attendee’s interpretation of these structures. Analyses of practice in relation to the circuit are limited to the preconstructed object, finding accounts of practice within either the organization of the circuit party proper and/or the way attendees understand the party proper. By framing practice in terms of this objectivist—and at times subjectivist—logic, the pro-gay critic is unable to effectively engage with the larger sets of power relations that make the circuit a possibility. These social relations, I argue, are part and parcel of a larger heteronormative

order—and by failing to interrogate this order the critic assists in its perpetuation. It is in this fashion that the classificatory struggles of critics function to produce and sustain an unequal social order. The interpretive strategies used by attendees as they negotiate through the meaning of *the look* operate in a similar manner: minimizing *the look* functions to keep *the look*, as a structuring axis, present in any consideration of the circuit, perpetuating the circuit's aesthetic hierarchy—a hierarchy that rests quite securely on normative links between a sexed and gendered body.

What is noteworthy about both the struggle over what the circuit means for gay men's communities and identification and how the look fits into the circuit experience is the way the body and bodily experience are intimately connected to these interpretations. Concerns, questions, and arguments about appropriate or healthy practices and experiences are, in many ways, about what attendees do with their bodies. Up for debate are what attendees wear, where attendees choose to have sex, how attendees touch each other, and what attendees choose to put in their bodies. There is very little critical consideration of what the implications of this emphasis means—indeed, there is little recognition that at the centre of these interpretive struggles is the body and its experiences. At the same time, a significant dimension of the minimization of the look is the way it is grounded in subjectivist accounts of practice. In short, successfully negotiating through *the look* depends on the subject's capacity to learn how to correctly understand what *the look* “really” means. *The look* is thus a problem of interpretation and meaning. As with the pro-gay critique, the body and bodily experience are central to these ruminations—although here the effect is to gloss over the role of the body and bodily experience in shaping practice. A close consideration of the circuit, however, suggests that the body and bodily experience are at the centre of the circuit experience—and, for this reason, need to be incorporated in any account of practice. Without attending to this centrality—what I identified as the ineffability of bodily experience—an adequate account of practice will remain elusive.

The challenge remains one of how to focus on the body and bodily experience in an account of practice. This mode of analysis—or perhaps focus—is not, however, something that emerges in light of a closer attention to the body and bodily experience. The body's ineffability is enough to suggest that merely attending to the body and bodily

experience is a short-sighted analytical strategy. In the following chapter, I turn once again to Bourdieu's field analysis as a means of fleshing out the conceptual strategies necessary for this sort of bodily attention.

## *Chapter 6*

### *The Circuit and the Field of Power: Neanderthals and the Micro-phallus*

A means of attending to the body and bodily experience—to the body’s ineffability—emerges if we continue to frame the circuit in terms of a field analysis. A field analysis—via the concept habitus—has enough conceptual room for the body and bodily experience. It is not, however, simply enough to observe and think about what bodies do or how bodies are experienced. The body and bodily experience must be understood in relation to a larger theoretical ensemble—to approach bodily experience in any other manner threatens to reset the trap of the preconstructed object in a different location. Thus, I understand the analytical approach I have adopted as a more productive way to think about the truth of the circuit. By “productive” and “truth” I mean that by thinking about the circuit through the concept of the field, it becomes possible to think about the circuit in ways that shift analytical energies outside of the current debates and interpretations, focusing on how the body and social field intersect.

I continue with this framing effort by turning to Bourdieu’s fourth structural characteristic of fields. Fields, he argues, have a relative autonomy in relation to other fields, a notion Bourdieu uses to address the dual character of fields—the way in which they are both autonomous from, and interconnected with, other fields. For Bourdieu the



suggestion that fields are autonomous represents a means of accounting for the contradictory effects and connections between material and symbolic interests or between subjective and objective constraints. “A fundamental methodological principle flows from the posited relative autonomy of fields, namely, the priority given to the internal analysis of fields” (Swartz 1997: 128). Given Bourdieu’s argument that the true object of analysis involves understanding the object as a particular instance of the possible—as an elongation of a larger theoretical ensemble—an internal analysis appears contradictory.

To study a larger ensemble on the basis of an internal analysis Bourdieu turns to his notion of homology. By homologies, Bourdieu means the similarities that exist across different social fields—what Swartz (1997) calls similarities with a difference. Bourdieu works with several different notions of homology: structural and functional homologies, homologous structures of opposition, and homologous strategies (Swartz 1997; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). He argues that each field has “its dominant and its dominated, its struggles for usurpation and exclusion, its mechanism of reproduction, and so on” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 106). Swartz (1997) clarifies: “homology of position among individuals and groups in different fields means that those who find themselves in dominated positions in the struggle for legitimation in one field often also find themselves in subordinate position in other fields” (p. 130).

Homology is Bourdieu’s means of avoiding an instrumental analysis based on rational calculation: there is an objective orchestration across different sub-fields, but this has little to do with any conscious adjustment on the part of subjects. Rather, similarities across different social settings are effects of the homologies between fields. For example in his study of taste, he writes:

The functional and structural homology which guarantees objective orchestration between the logic of the field of production and the logic of the field of consumption arises from the fact that all the specialized fields (haute couture or painting, theatre or literature) tend to be governed by the same logic, i.e., according to the volume of the specific capital that is possessed, (and according to seniority or possession, which is often associated with volume) and from the fact that the oppositions which tend to be established in each case between the richer and the less rich in the specific capital [...] are mutually homologous and homologous to the

oppositions which structure the field of the social classes and the field of the dominant classes. (Bourdieu 1984: 232)

There is, in short, symbolic and structural isomorphism in function, meaning, or practice across various fields. “Bourdieu thus draws different kinds of analogies between fields. Some point to an underlying function of social reproduction. Others point to isomorphic patterns of hierarchy in positions and strategies of agents” (Swartz 1997: 133). Field homologies function to replicate patterns of conflict across different fields, thus reproducing patterns and structures of domination/subordination and conflict across social space.

The analytical focus is the homologous relations that exist within and across fields—or what makes these isomorphisms possible, coherent, and sensible. To keep this focus active, Bourdieu turns to his notion “field of power”—“a sort of ‘meta-field’ that operates as an organizing principle of differentiation and struggle throughout *all* fields” (Swartz 1997: 136). At the heart of this organizing principle is a fundamental opposition and struggle for power over or through symbolic and material resources. The struggle over and between economic capital (wealth, income, and property) and cultural capital (knowledge, culture, and educational credentials) delineates and determines relatively autonomous sets of relations that determine the machinations of all fields of interaction. This fundamental opposition is what delineates the field of power (Swartz 1997). Ultimately those with more economic and cultural capital are more successful in negotiating through the objective relations of particular “sub-fields” and are able to derive more benefit from a field’s associated stakes. This struggle informs—determines is too strong a word—all other field relations (say education or artistic endeavours) and constitutes what Bourdieu identifies as the “field of power”. In this sense the struggle between economic and cultural capital represents a structural or functional homology.

With this elaboration on the notion field, Bourdieu is not, however, arguing for any simple structural or economic determinism as some would argue (Jenkins 1992). While he agrees that in advanced capitalist societies it would be very difficult to argue that the economic field does not “exercise especially powerful determinations” the precise nature of this determination is something “only an empirical analysis can tackle” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 109). The extent and nature of relations between fields

are empirical considerations and not something that can be determined on the basis of *a priori* considerations:

relations between fields [...] are not defined once and for all, even in the most generally tendencies of their evolution. The notion of field does not provide ready made answers to all possible queries, in the manner of the grand concepts of 'theoreticist theory' which claims to explain everything and in the right order. Rather, its major virtue, at least in my eyes, is that it promotes a mode of construction that has to be rethought anew every time. It forces us to raise questions: about the limits of the universe under investigation, how it is 'articulated,' to what and what degree, etc. (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 110).

Thus, while Bourdieu's field analysis would direct any analysis of the circuit to economic or class considerations, configuring the field of power in these terms is neither necessary nor given. It is clear that within the circuit, economic and cultural capital come into play in explaining practice. Without the appropriate economic capital, attendance at a circuit event is not possible. A circuit event is not a small undertaking; a long weekend's worth of events can easily cost between \$1500 and \$2000 as well as the capacity to take time away from employment. At the same time, the majority of those interviewed had attained some degree of post-secondary education. Mattison's (2001) non-random sample of (American) circuit attendees revealed that 68% had obtained a bachelor's degree. Compare this to the general population in Canada, where just less than 9% of the population has a bachelor degree.<sup>13</sup>

Conceptualizing the field of power in terms of economic and cultural capital is, however, somewhat constrained in relation to the circuit. Attendees are relatively homogenous in light of the various costs associated with a circuit event; to attend an event one has to have the material resources to do so. In the language of variable analysis, economic capital and cultural capital do not vary to a considerable degree. This begins to suggest that neither economic nor cultural capital overdetermines practice *within* the circuit due to the various admission fees and associated costs. Thus, framing the circuit experience as an elongation of a larger economic and cultural order is not an entirely useful analytical move.

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<sup>13</sup> Author's calculations, based on the 1996 Canadian Census PUMF for individuals.

Elsewhere, Bourdieu offers a slightly looser notion of the field of power when he writes, “By field of power, I mean the relations of force that obtain between the social positions which guarantee their occupants a quantum of social force, or of capital, such that they are able to enter into the struggles over the monopoly of power, of which struggles over the definition of the legitimate form of power are a crucial dimension” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 229). I take this to mean that the field of power is not necessarily about economic or cultural capital. Bourdieu writes, “I believe...that there are no transhistorical laws of relations between fields, that we must investigate each historical case separately” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 109). While the circuit, as a field, is situated and related to the field of power as conceptualised by Bourdieu—and this offers a partial account for how attendees reach the circuit field—there is, I argue, an equally significant field of gendered power relations that overdetermines practice *within* the circuit. Attendees understand the circuit as a distinctly *gay male* space, and the coding used to mark the circuit as a gay men’s space is fairly normative in its structure: the tight gym toned body forms a significant back drop against which attendees understand themselves and others.

The analytical task is to use the experiences with and around the preconstructed object of the circuit party proper to adumbrate the main force lines—the gendered power relations—that make the circuit a possibility. Doing so rests not on exploring the details of the circuit party proper—the mistake witnessed in Chapter 2—but on exploring these details in light of knowledge of the theoretical ensemble that makes the party proper a possibility. As a means of thinking about this broader field of power—the conditions of possibility—of which the circuit is a concrete moment I return to some of the theoretical musings from which this research began—with the work of Judith Butler. In particular, I draw on Butler’s notion of the heterosexual economy of desire as a means of thinking about the field of power. In bringing Butler to bear upon Bourdieu I am trying to do more than recommend a novel way of thinking about the circuit. I am also proposing a kind of synthesis—a way of using Butler to further the scope of Bourdieu’s analyses which are surprisingly silent on the issue of same sex-desire (except see Bourdieu 2001). Thus not only does Butler’s notion of the heterosexual economy of desire represent a novel and

critical means of thinking about the circuit, but it also represents a way of extending the scope of Bourdieu's analytical grasp.

This synthesis is not, however, unidirectional; I also bring Bourdieu to bear upon Butler. Recall that Butler conceptualizes identity as a compelled "doing" of the discursive ideals of the heterosexual economy of desire, which in turn allows for an understanding of agency and resistance as a resignification of this compulsory doing. One of the major benefits emerging from this conceptualization is an understanding of identification and practice in terms of relations of heteronormative power rather than as an effect of socialization (or worse, essence). As outlined in the second theoretical interlude there are, however, two critiques that may be levelled at this account. On the one hand, Butler fails to adequately situate practice and change—(re)signification—in a set of social relations. Where and under what conditions are the cultural practices of resignification possible? And what, precisely, does repetition involve? What—in short—are the dynamics of the heterosexual economy of desire? On the other hand, her analysis fails to consider the somatically embedded nature of innovative practice or change. How do we foreground the bodily aspects of innovative action and change—aspects that seem to take centre stage in the context of the circuit?

Answers to these questions begin to present themselves if we move to conceptualise the heterosexual economy of desire in terms made available through Bourdieu's analytical framework—as a field or network of social positions arranged in relation to capital. Conceptualising Butler in terms of Bourdieu enables thinking about the notion of the heterosexual economy of desire as set of social relations in which the tripartite structure of the field-capital-habitus relationship can be employed to outline its mechanics. At the same time by bringing the notions of field, capital, and habitus to bear upon the heterosexual economy of desire it becomes possible to think about the body and bodily experiences insofar as habitus represents embodied dispositions and preferences—and thus address the bodily or somatic dimensions practice.

Overall, thinking about the field of power in terms of the heterosexual economy of desire opens up the possibility of using Bourdieu's tripartite structure to explore the link between the body and bodily experience—as habitus—and a broader field of heterosexist power relations—a theoretical ensemble—that extend beyond the confines

of the preconstructed object of the circuit party proper. As a means of setting the stage for thinking about how the heterosexual economy of desire comes to inform practice through the circuit, I return to the conversation I had with Barry, initially introduced in Chapter 3. We had been talking about his experiences with the circuit; he had begun talking about Fire Island—observing, *It's beautiful and very sexual, but it's always been very sexual*. Later in our conversation, he returned to elaborate on this idea:

People are constantly on the prowl and looking for the next thing all the time. But I don't think that will change until the rest of the world tolerates us—and I don't think we'll be accepted, only tolerated—but then it won't be such an issue. I think once we can come out when we are kids and not have to worry about anything—then we'll end up not being so focused on sex. (Fieldnotes 2001, Barry)

Barry touches on one of the more complex and contentious characterizations attached to gay men's identities: the notion that gay men, as a group, are obsessed with sexual pursuits. While I believe it was Barry's intention to dismantle and account for that stereotype, it is interesting that he uses the bodily focus of sexual practice to exemplify and crystallize gay men's practice more generally. That the body and its practices are a site of struggle for gay men is something that is not lost on Barry—an insight that he approaches through a rather sophisticated analysis. For him, the focus or emphasis is entirely sensible in light of the relationship between gay men and a larger heterosexist context rather than a weakness or inevitability of character: *I don't think that will change until the rest of the world tolerates us*.

Barry's thoughts are evocative; I read them as a kind of living theory, a notion that emerged in the fieldnote excerpt immediately following this account:

I responded in a way that made sense to me—I was surprised and excited by what I saw as a theoretical idea made concrete and living right in front of me—in a bathhouse of all places: “That's true. We grow up in these heterosexist contexts and are bound to be products of that context.” What I was thinking was that the practices and ideas around sex don't do anything but produce us as over sexualised subjects. The constraints and resistances around same sex desire don't give us much of an option but to know ourselves as and through a sexual lens. (Fieldnotes 2001, Barry)

I raise Barry's thoughts as a starting point for several reasons. Overall, and broadly, Barry's commentary, as a kind of theorizing in action, gives concrete expression to Butler's suggestion that there exists a “structuring presence of heterosexual constructs

within gay and lesbian sexuality” (Butler 1990: 124). Barry’s ideas are also useful because they illustrate the intersection between a broader field of power and the body in practice. He links the bodily/sexual practices of gay men to the issue of tolerance, a tolerance that hinges, ultimately, on how heteronormative constraints impinge on how gay men use their bodies with each other. In effect, Barry’s account indexes his own experience and analysis of a larger field of power—the heterosexual economy of desire—and its intersection with the body to produce practice. Barry is, in effect, asking and answering the central question occupying this research: How does the heterosexual economy of desire, as the field of power in which the circuit is embedded, intersect with the body to produce practice?

## Overview

In the following section I turn, once again, to how attendees think their way through *the look*, listening to how these negotiations are linked to things that are not simply about the circuit party proper—negotiations that, in short, gesture to that set of heteronormative relations that make these negotiations sensible. It is on the basis of these gestures and knowledge of the heterosexual economy of desire that I adumbrate “the main force lines that structure” the circuit—that is, how the circuit represents a particular instance of the possible, an elongation or expression of conditions of its own possibility (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 233). In listening to the voices of attendees, I focus first on what amounts to gender identification based on an approximation or mimicry of the look and what the look means. Following this, I also introduce moments of identification based on a negation or a disavowal of what the look and its attendant meanings cannot be. To make sense of this form of identification through rejection, I return to the Judith Butler’s performative account of identity.

### “...in a Neanderthal-like way...”

He started to talk about his first circuit-like event: “And, I mean, I don’t want to make it sound like it was something amazing or anything like that, but it was that night that I finally saw something that I could see myself being. I looked around and saw all these guys—all these guys who I could see myself being—and that night was a turning point, it turned things around for me. I saw what I understood to be gay, that was what I wanted, what I knew what I wanted to be.” (Fieldnotes 2000, Drew)

Drew's first circuit-like experience reflected back to him—*I finally saw something that I could see myself being*—a self-understanding that was commensurate with his own sense of what he *understood to be gay*—a sense that was, for much of his life inaccessible to him:

For years I lived my life so cautiously and carefully, cognisant that every misstep, every glance, every comment could reveal my homosexuality well before I was ready. It forced me into this oppressed state where my self-esteem and sense of self worth were highly guarded. I don't think I am alone in this experience. I grew up in a small town with small minds. There were no role models of what a gay man's life was about. Everything I read or heard was negative, hateful, hence oppressive. Yes, eventually I was educated differently. But what academia couldn't give me was what that first circuit experience did. That night, for me, was a pivotal time in my development as a gay man. That night I saw myself as a happy, carefree, accepted man who just so happened to be gay. My gayness was not holding me back from experiencing the intense emotions and feelings that being gay has to offer. Over time, I have found myself more relaxed about the possibilities, more eager to let my other guards down, allow my masculinity to emerge in a Neanderthal-like way. (Fieldnotes 2000, Drew)

Three important issues come together in Drew's reflections. First, it is through the circuit that Drew had an opportunity to realise—in the double sense of to understand and to make real—a new ground for self-understanding: *I saw what I understood to be gay, that was what I wanted*. In short, the circuit gave him a new language for thinking about and speaking about a sexualised and gendered self that made sense but was, until that point, inaccessible or inexpressible to him. In a very profound way, Drew's reflections highlight the way in which the circuit is about a struggle for social recognition.

Second, this mode of recognition occurs through the body and bodily experience. Having the opportunity and social space to be *what I wanted*, Drew was in a position where gayness did not prohibit him *from experiencing the intense emotions and feelings that being gay has to offer*. Here, we might note that it is unlikely that Drew's gayness was holding him back—it was, rather, the lack of acceptance on the part of others regarding his *gayness*. We have then, an experience of social recognition that occurs through or in relation to the body and bodily experience: *intense emotions and feelings*. The third issue that becomes apparent is the link between this bodily recognition and rather particular understandings of gender: *Over time, I have found myself more relaxed*



*about the possibilities, more eager to let my other guards down, allow my masculinity to emerge in a Neanderthal-like way.*

Thus, not only did the circuit afford Drew a sense of place, a sense of recognition, but this recognition was mediated—if not made possible—through bodily experiences and the body made sensible through notions of gender. Drew’s word choice—*allow my masculinity to emerge in a Neanderthal-like way*—is evocative. It suggests, in short, an almost unthinking, and bodily form of masculinity—one that maps neatly onto rather conventional notions of masculinity. The link between the circuit and masculinity is particularly clear in light of Frank’s comments:

I think it’s a celebration of masculinity for sure. So you want to epitomize everything masculine about you. That’s where the facial hair comes in; chest hair is coming back, the big muscles, the cock rings make your genitals protrude: everything that can epitomize male sexuality and being a man is epitomized on these dance floors. (Frank)

In short, the circuit is a man’s world. In light of Frank’s words, it does not become difficult to argue that the masculine look of the circuit is a studied look—one that is, in many respects, consciously and deliberately crafted through musculature, other idioms of masculinity, a studied posturing, and attitude. Attendees can, and do, actively *epitomize everything masculine*:

I’m not sure when I noticed him, but at one point, a very cute ripped muscle boy came into view. Hard and tight, very boxy in appearance—reminded me of one of those boxer dogs—with a leather shoulder strap covering his chest and secured at his belt. Came to think of him as “Boxy Boy” for the rest of the night. He was dancing really hard—really lost in the dance—with what looked like a couple of friends. It took a while, but I noticed his dancing was all tied up with whoops and hollers he was making to the music—but not just any whoops and hollers. As he danced and pounded out a rhythm to the music, he gave out a hard, rough dog-like “woof”. At first, I sort of thought it was funny, a bit odd, but then it sort of made sense. What was interesting is the way it just fit, the way it just felt right. At one point, I yelled out—just to see what would happen—“Who let the dogs out?!” Someone around me picked that up as a response to Boxy Boy’s “woofs”. Later I mentioned it to the rest. And I’m glad it wasn’t me who made the observation: Drew said “it was very masculine and rough. Really very guy-ish.” (Fieldnotes 2000)

The term “woof” is frequently used as a way of expressing approval to a tough-looking masculine sensibility. And while Boxy Boy’s “woofs” are hardly a regular occurrence on

the circuit, they do begin to suggest how some of the postures found within the circuit are gendered: a studied, cool, masculinity grounded in musculature, accessories, and a certain attitude expressed through *the look*.

Marc begins to link this bodily expression of *the look* to a related set of masculine monikers:

I think there is a new clone that has a certain kind of tattoo and a certain kind of haircut and a certain kind of beefiness. That's pretty obvious and you see that a lot at circuit type events— it looks pretty cookie cutter. I think there has always been a clone and there is a new clone—and it's a circuit clone. I'm not sure what they call it—Chelsea Boy? So that's *the look*—it's kind of a beefy tough macho thing. (Marc)

This configuration of masculinity through a tattooed, butch, macho look—is further emphasised by the (very) loose themes holding parties together. Many parties are frequently organized around military, leather, or jock themes, where iconographies of a conventional and normative Western masculinity appear as accessories that accentuate *the look*:

Boys were milling about in half-formed queues with all the right get up: combat boots, cargo pants, some uniforms, buzz-cuts, and captain's hats. At the leather event it was the same: lots of harnesses, chains, chaps, heavy black biker-looking boots, leather caps, more than a couple decked out in what looked like leather armour—gauntlets of leather that looked like some sort of medieval scale-mail covering the arm up to the shoulder—very gladiator like. (Fieldnotes 1999)

Aside from some of the gendered themes associated with particular parties is the gendered nature of what might be called a circuit uniform:

Guys are walking by in various sorts of dress/undress. Most still look good even now at 6:00 in the morning. A fair amount of them are dressed up—not quite in costume because it's just too hot to dance in anything that might be construed as a costume—but in funky sort of dance clothing. So dressed up, but not “dressed” up: there is a circuit uniform. A couple of boys in matching skin-tight latex pants in red and black snake skin. They're snug and they both have the muscles to pull it off. Thick leather arm bands. Another in tight shorts—shinny material of some kind. Looking a bit worse for wear—the stretch pulled out of them. Clunky tough looking black boots, sporty runners. Black tights sporting Adidas stripes down the legs. Cargo pants from Abercrombie and Fitch or some variant. T-shirts with sport logos on them, cargo/sport pants of some kind, runners. Teflon or nylon track pants with the edge of a jock strap showing

at the waist. A very big black boy with yellow tights that laced up the back. Butched-up cowboy hats. Loose enough to dance in, light enough to breathe, tight enough to accent whatever bulge is up for show. No one with a shirt on. A combination of comfort and masculine cool. (Fieldnotes 2000)

While interpreted through the twists of a gay sensibility, this uniform is informed by and expresses conventional notions of masculinity.

Steroids—or at least the idea of steroids—also plays a role in the construction of *the look* and the circuit experience:

We were standing outside waiting for the rest of them. He says to me, “What do you think? Fifty percent of those guys in there on steroids?” I wasn’t sure. Don’t really have a clue, but is it that high? I’m sceptical. He continues, “I work out a lot, and hard. And I don’t get anything like that.” I’m still sceptical. “It’s seductive, the steroids,” was his reply to me. “I know it’s bad for you, there are risks but I know that those great bodies are still from steroids.” He told a brief tale: “I was over at a friend’s place, we were getting ready to go out or whatever, and he looks great. He was getting out of the shower, looking at himself in the mirror and said, ‘not a bad body for \$1200.00 eh?’” (Fieldnotes 2000)

The role of steroids as part of a conscious decision to enter into the construction of a particular kind of masculinity emerges quite clearly in Dale’s comments:

Steroids are very common—a lot of guys who do the circuit do them. A lot of my friends do it. I do it sometimes. It’s vanity. It’s the price you pay for trying to look your best. It’s like a personal preference, it’s up to you, and it’s a personal choice. There are consequences but some people choose to take the risk. I do. (Dale)

Alex was equally aware of the role steroids played in the circuit:

But it seems like steroid use is way more prevalent, seems like there’s not many people that *aren’t* doing steroids. I assume anyone that’s big is taking them because I’ve kind of come to discover that very few can achieve the body type that we’re all aspiring to without steroids. I don’t think you can physically have the circuit body—with the group that I hang out with at circuit parties—without doing the steroids. (Alex)

The calculation associated with *the look* and steroids is particularly clear in Sam’s reflections:

Yeah, I know a lot of people do steroids and time it to events. Are we pushing ourselves too hard by using steroids? I think a lot of people that you see using it don’t have the time to spend at the gym. Really if you want one of those bodies—and you’re not using steroids—you have to

spend a helluva a lot of time at the gym and eating just right and constantly. But you can get it from steroids pretty fast—eight weeks. And they like the fact that they get a testosterone boost and they feel more aggressive and have sexual energy on their steroids. I can see that. I don't know if that's the norm. I would say it's about 50-50 steroid use for the big events—especially the one's in LA or Miami's Winter Party—there's a huge amount of guys on steroids. (Sam)

What is interesting about Sam's assessment is not only the role steroids play in the bodily expression of a particular masculinity, but his comments also further support the suggestion that the circuit is tightly linked to social recognition that takes place across or through the body. Sam speaks of a *testosterone boost* and the associated effects this bodily experience has on sexual confidence, a confidence grounded in conventional notions of masculinity and sex. Alex's reflections help round this out:

I think that I probably wouldn't have been doing all this circuit party stuff if I didn't take steroids because first of all I don't feel like I fit in, I don't think I'd feel as aggressive or as sexual about doing this kind of stuff  
(Alex)

Notably, Alex's fear that he might not *fit in* if he *didn't take steroids* is about being able to realise the gendered identity linked to *the look*, a gendered identity that emerges in a *Neanderthal-like way—aggressive and sexual*.

While Dale, Alex, and Sam are convinced that the bulk of attendees have tried or used steroids to help construct and develop a muscled body, any suggestion that all circuit attendees use or even ponder the use of steroids would be untrue. The degree to which—and whether or not—steroids are used is not, however, as significant as the fact that the idea of steroid use has a role in how attendees think about and experience the circuit and *the look*. Differently, while it may be possible to divide circuit attendees into those who use steroids and those who do not, such a division would not prove analytically useful. Rather, I read steroids—as chemical and idea—as a more concentrated elongation of a shared interest in musculature, working out, and the gym. Steroids do not present a particular specificity—they are merely part of a broader interest in constructing a particular kind of gendered body.

This relationship between the circuit, masculinity, and the body as a kind of mimicry is no more apparent than in the way physical contact—and the tone or texture of dancing more generally—is subtly gendered. Physical contact between dancers can

frequently involve rhythmic playful pugilistic punches on the chests and shoulders of others. Attendees will squeeze, flex, or otherwise tense their muscles as they receive massages or head rubs from others. Aspects of touching and co-touching invariably involve an appreciation of musculature and form—shoulder muscles are rubbed appreciatively, biceps and triceps squeezed as a gesture of recognition. As a kind of gendered physical configuration, touch is subtly coded masculine—one might say touch emphasizes or perhaps privileges “butch”. This configuration also manifests itself in the postures and stances attendees bring to their dance. Certainly each attendee brings with him a unique dance style, but there exists a notable degree of similarity across individual dancers in terms of the rigidity and stiffness of the movements. The physical configuration that accompanies much of this variation can be characterized in terms of a generality—as something that characterizes the circuit in a way not found in other dance events or sites. Peculiar to this physical configuration is its emphasis on masculinity. There is little bending at the waist, only small degrees of torsion in the upper body, legs remain relatively unbent, with arms slightly bent and held close to the body—mimicking, ever so slightly, a boxer’s pose. Curling hands into a fist and punching the rhythm of the music out above one’s head, clasping one fist in the other hand above the head in a way that begins to emphasize abdominals and intercostals, studied poses of bravado, and a macho hooking of thumbs into pockets or belts all suggest that what characterizes the circuit is not merely touching or dancing but a touching and dancing interpreted and enacted through notions of masculinity.

That this style of dancing bodily configuration is peculiar or specific to a circuit crowd can be substantiated in several ways. First, I have heard attendees refer to this style of dancing as “pogo-stick”, as a way of characterizing the general up and down motion associated with it. That this general dancing bodily configuration is something that some attendees have a label for would suggest that attendees both share and recognize it. Second, other researchers have made similar observations and conclusions. In her study of queer club culture in New York City, Buckland (2002) made the following observations about dancers at the now closed dance club Twilo:

Keeping this house in order were predominantly white men who worked their bodies in the gym to an Adonis-type template that they worked on the dance floor. The almost all wore tight T-shirts, which they removed

and tucked into the back of their pants when things got sweaty on the dance floor. Typically, their range of movement was similar to gym exercises: little flexibility of the spine, with shoulders moving as a yoked unit. Movement was about effort, not fluidity. The mass of moment seemed to be [...] more up and down, although never leaving the floor. Generally, the men held their arms either close to their body, occasionally raised in the air, or clasped around a friend. (Buckland 2002: 72).

Significantly, Twilo was a club that circulates as a referent point and common experience among circuit attendees. Those who do the circuit made a point of going to Twilo while in New York City. When Alex learned about my first trip to New York City, he impressed upon me: *Oh, you have to go to Twilo* and during our interview, he used his experience at Twilo as a means of explaining what sort of experience he was looking for when he attended circuit events:

The best experience I had was on my birthday in 1997. I went to New York City, did ecstasy, went to Twilo, went to this big kind of circuit-like event, met this guy, we spent the entire night together and we went home together. And we called each other for days and he sent me flowers—and that experience was the best thing in my life and that’s sort of what I look for when I go to a circuit party. (Alex)

In a conversation with a New Yorker while at a circuit party, I came to learn that:

he was thrilled with the scale and scope of this party. He said New York doesn’t have this sort of event, even if they have things like Twilo and the Roxy—and apparently the Black Party wasn’t much as far as he was concerned. (Fieldnotes 2000)

The Roxy is a very large club in New York catering to gay men with a resident DJ who regularly performs on the circuit. Similarly, Sam used Twilo, the Roxy and Salvation (a similar club in Miami) as a means of thinking about his circuit experiences:

Hmm. I’ve had some good nights at Twilo—but I guess because they are kind of a mini-vacation combined with a circuit party so it’s a little bit different. You probably see the same guys on the dance floor for one or two or three nights—the same people. There are some similarities to Roxy or Twilo or Salvation. There are some similarities—the music, the men, the drugs. (Sam)

Moreover, during its life time, commentary on Twilo—the music, its crowd, special events, the resident DJ—had relatively regular play on email listserves and discussion forums oriented toward the circuit party attendee. Third, that this particular style of dancing is characteristic to the circuit experience also emerges through a comparison to

what one finds at a rave. Dancers at raves engage in far more frenetic movement—arms move in much more acute fashions, hips are engaged in a more pronounced manner allowing for more locomotion (moving across the dance floor rather than remaining relatively stationary), with more bends to the knees and considerably more motion to the upper body.

This is not, of course, to suggest that all circuit attendees dance in this fashion—it is merely to suggest that as a generality, circuit attendees' dance can be interpreted as carrying or embodying a masculine sensibility that is not only accentuated in many ways, but peculiar to the circuit. It can certainly be argued that music with more vocals invariably leads attendees to raise their hands above their head and scream appreciatively, suggesting that attendees are just as likely to dance in a manner that is considerably less masculine than the above argument allows for. It is telling, however, that any hand gestures above the shoulders are jokingly identified as being “above the fag line” or “big girl moves”. Equally telling is the way in which the music which invokes this type of dancing is regularly referred to “fluffy”, “girl music”, “pretty”, and “light” while music that does not fall into this category is framed as “hard”, “edgier”, “dark”, and “dirty”. At one level jokes and gentle ribbing about “big girl moves” are, of course, just that: jokes and gentle ribbing. At another level, however, jokes, as gentle as they might be, are also policing mechanisms which function, in subtle ways, to gender the dance masculine. Jokes identify the speaker with—and, in no easy and direct way, constrain the subject to—a particular kind of masculine configuration. In raising this, I wish to raise what I believe is an important aspect of gendered identification—at least within the context of the circuit. As much as identification is based on an approximation or mimicry of the look, it is also grounded in concerns about what cannot or should be part of this approximation.

This aspect of identification emerges in Andy's reflections on his first circuit experience. He noted that what appealed to him was a North American masculine sensibility that was, in his experience, absent among gay men in his native Holland and Europe more generally. For Andy, gay men in Europe had less to prove by being more masculine due to the higher degree of legislative equality:

Gay guys are pretty much integrated in straight society; they have a lot of straight friends so they don't have the feeling to hang out with their gay buddies. We also don't have gay ghettos; we don't have areas in cities where it's strictly gay—like Castro or Chelsea—because everything is already integrated in our society. I think that the fact that you live in gay ghettos is because you are looking for some security with your own people. You go to the gay supermarket, or to the gay doctor, so you are not ashamed to talk about whatever you dealing with. In Amsterdam there are a lot of gay guys but there are no gay areas—everyone is living everywhere. Of course we have the street where all the bars are but that is basically it. When it comes to other things like health care centres or supermarkets or services—they are everywhere. The gay guys live everywhere. Everyone is mixed up because we have the same rights. (Andy)

As a result, Andy contends that gay men in Europe:

can be more open about being gay. So a lot of guys don't develop their masculinity and they don't have to act differently during daytime. The point is that they also *behave* very gay. Most of them behave very queeny—their interests are different. So a lot of them are into fashion and labels and stuff. And going to the gym is actually very uncommon. Everything straight boys do, most gay guys don't like. So they don't like to play snooker, they don't like to work out. I'm talking about a majority. When you go to big cities—Amsterdam, London, Paris, Barcelona—you will see the same crowd as you have here. Boys that know how to party. (Andy)

What is significant here is the link Andy makes between a masculinity based on “straightness” and *Boys that know how to party*. For him, the circuit is about a particular kind of North American masculinity:

In North America they are different. I like the North American lifestyle, I like the masculinity, and I like the way they dress—or undress—the sportswear stuff; that's what I prefer. Everyone is busy hiking and doing sporting things. (Andy)

Andy uses this notion—manifested in his own choice of clothing and configuration—to distinguish himself from those who *behave very queeny*. For Andy, the North American masculine gay man is the circuit boy—the one's who are *busy with their muscles*, where *gay men can be masculine*. Whether or not there is a distinct kind of North American masculine sensibility is, I suppose, open for debate. The important point is that the circuit, in Andy's estimation, is about a particular kind of masculinity—one that might, at some level, be read as a “straight” masculinity—or at least one that is not *queeny*.



There is then, a concerted effort on the part of attendees to exercise and realise a particular experience of masculinity, one grounded in particular bodily practices associated with bodily configuration, dress, and gesture. While this exercise is carried out with more or less intensity, more or less success, and more or less commitment on the part of individual attendees, it would be difficult to argue that the realization of masculinity, through an approximation of *the look*, is not intimately connected to the circuit experience.

What becomes particularly interesting for the purposes of understanding the field of power in which the circuit is situated is not so much that the circuit seems to be about the realisation of masculinity as it is that the circuit and its pleasures are premised on a fairly consistent rejection and policing of anything that might be construed as, or associated with, femininity. The observation that one dances with *big girl moves* or a concern about those who *behave very gay* is a subtler expression of broader pattern of regulation, policing, and identity production. Thus, a distinction might be made between a gendered identification based on an approximation of the look, through a kind of mimicry, and a gendered identification based on a negation, disavowal, or rejection of that which cannot be masculine.

### **Judith Butler and the Heterosexual Economy of Desire**

To better understand the implications of this negative or exclusionary logic and what it might have to say for thinking about the circuit and practice, I return to Judith Butler's (1990) notion of the heterosexual economy of desire. I use this notion as a conceptual frame to point out that as much as the circuit space is a space of gay men's sexual play, or a space through which gay men realise a sense of masculinity through *the look*, it is as tightly connected to a larger heteronormative order as any other moment in our social experience. At first blush, it appears counterintuitive to use this notion to help frame dance spectacles that are organized around and for gay men. Butler (1990) argues, however, that there are no social spaces or social relations outside or beyond the heterosexual economy of desire—there even exists a “structuring presence of heterosexual constructs within gay and lesbian sexuality” (Butler 1990: 124). By way of explanation, she writes, “for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex

expressed through a stable gender that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality” (Butler 1990: 151).

The vast bulk of academic analyses of sexuality and gender is grounded in a social constructionist approach—and Butler’s (1990) obviously so. Butler’s (1990) position, however, is probably better marked as a form of radical social constructionism in that she assumes that there is nothing about gender and sexuality that is fixed or biologically given. The subject—indeed the nature and extent of the subject’s body—is an open potentiality that does not exist in any meaningful way before the discursive contours of the heterosexual economy of desire. The subject is constituted as an intelligible subject only as the meanings of this economy of desire are lived in practice. Butler’s unique contribution to the social constructionist debate is the suggestion that the heterosexual economy of desire produces sexed and gendered identities on the basis of a process of *abjection* grounded in a logic which privileges males who are men who desire women and females who are women who desire men. The open potentiality of the body represents an intolerable categorical ambiguity that must be eliminated by situating the potentially open subject within heterosexist categories. A significant implication emerges: if identity is constructed through an abjection of aspects of the self that might be described as categorically ambivalent in the context of heterosexual configurations of self, then that which is abjected is, in some sense, necessarily part of the subject. Thus, disavowal also implies a kind of incorporation of the disavowed; what we are not is necessarily part of what we are.

In short, identity is an effect of a disavowal of that which does not resonate with this heterosexist logic. That disavowed aspects of the self are present in their absence require a degree of boundary maintenance, manifested in exclusion or violence. While the circuit is quintessentially a gay experience it is also a space where the realization of masculinity is premised on an exclusionary logic, where disavowal and abjection are part of what holds self-identification together. As such, this logic is necessarily heterosexist in its organisation. This logic is easily translated into Bourdieu’s vernacular: as a network of positions, the heterosexual economy of desire’s organisation is informed by the presence and value of various forms of capital. And while there are certainly a variety of types of capital in circulation in this field, the degree to which a subject approximates

heterosexist ideals represents a major structuring factor. Here, heterosexism means a normative configuration of sex, gender, and desire. It is in this way that I try to incorporate Butler's notion of the heterosexual economy of desire into this research—her notion represents a way of thinking about the field of power in which the circuit is situated.

Doing so rests on understanding a key point in the logic of the heterosexual economy of desire, as outlined by Butler (1990). In particular, as much as the heterosexual economy of desire is a productive set of power relations that produces a coherent identity, it is also a regulatory mechanism that enforces coherence on the basis of exclusion and violence—particularly for those whose bodies (and thus identities) fall outside the boundaries of normative configurations of sex, gender and desire. This is, of course, the undoing of power in general and the heterosexual economy of desire in particular. That there is no necessary configuration to identity as we experience it—that a coherent identification is an effect of power—compels the reiteration of identity making practices. Coherence must be produced through a reiteration of practice because identity is never once and for all; it is always a process of becoming through repetition. In short, if we accept Butler's analysis, both power—as it is configured through the heterosexual economy of desire—and the identities it produces—and upon which it rests—are, at some level, fragile and delicate constructs.

It is in light of the instability of identification—the fact that a sense of self never simply is but must always be in a process of becoming—that the body and bodily practice become so central to the mechanics of the heterosexual economy of desire. The point that the productive and regulatory effect of the heterosexual economy of desire both creates and controls is first, foremost, and most obviously the body and the productive and regulatory effects of the heterosexual economy of desire emerge most clearly when the body's "natural" organization is transgressed. Indeed, the body in all its polymorphous perversity is the necessary ground upon which this economy of desire is made coherent; without the body, there is no heterosexual economy of desire, no point for power's application. It is thus not surprising that Barry uses sexual practice—a bodily expression and construction of the self—as a way of speaking about, exemplifying, or crystallizing gay men's practice in general.

The circuit represents an excellent crucible to think about the fragility of identifications and their reiteration through bodily practice. There are two obvious reasons for this: the circuit is not only about masculinity but also about a gay identity. In Frank's words, *everything that can epitomize male sexuality and being a man is epitomized on these dance floors* while in Marc's experience, the circuit is something put on *for gay people* and was the first place where he felt most proud to be gay. As social categories and identities, both masculinity and gay subjectivity are major points for the application of power's productive and regulatory effects. As feminists have illustrated, masculinity is a particularly fragile identification while queer theory has suggested that the gay body represents a threat to the coherence of the heterosexual economy of desire by virtue of the fact that same-sex desire represents a constitutive outside. The masculine subject and the heterosexual economy of desire are possible only in relation to power and are thus fragile. In the context of the circuit, it is possible to witness some of the considerable work and effort that go into ensuring the coherence of masculinity and the control of a gay subjectivity.

***“I think I had like micro-phallus”***

The fragility of this self-identification is poignantly articulated in Alex's ruminations. I asked Alex about his worst circuit experience—a question I posed to all of those interviewed. He proceeded to give me an account of a particularly troubling near-overdose:

It was when I went to the Black Party in New York. I was at the Recovery Party and I was trying to keep up with some friends. I had made my own bumper of trail mix: Viagra, ketamine, and ecstasy. I was trying to keep up with my friends who were bumping ketamine. And they were pretty big ketamine users and I don't really like ketamine. And every time they bumped I thought “I can take a bump too.” And I kept bumping ketamine and feeling alright, and then all of a sudden out of the blue I was dancing with this guy who I was having this really really incredible connection—probably the closest to a spiritual connection of anybody. Anyway I was having this spiritual connection with this guy and all of a sudden I felt sick. And I thought, “Uh-oh I'm gonna get sick.” And then he started to put his hands down my pants and I had no dick at that moment because I was like so high. I think I had like micro-phallus. And I was so embarrassed and I didn't want him touching me. And that made me more paranoid and uncomfortable. And so basically I excused myself

from him. Or actually he went away and I went into this paranoid thing, thinking, “He went away because I had small dick.” And I kind of got all weirded out. (Alex)

In the remainder of Alex’s account, he details a frightening chronology of events: feeling that he was near passing out twice, suffering hallucinations, paranoia, extreme anxiety, and an intense sensation that he might never return to normal. Alex’s account of his worst experience is, most obviously, about a struggle to remain out of a near overdose of ketamine. In crude terms, Alex was very close to passing out or “falling into a k-hole” where the disassociative effects of ketamine are experienced as a disconnection between the brain and the body.

Also embedded in this account is a means of understanding his practice, an explanation grounded in both an approximation or mimicry of particular gendered notions associated with the circuit, as well as his active rejection of that which cannot be—should not be—part of how he self-identifies. Alex begins his account with what appears to be no more than a garden variety case of keeping up with the Joneses, a form of approximation or mimicry: *I was trying to keep up with some friends. And every time they bumped I thought “I can take a bump too.”* When I asked after this, he later explained:

Why did I need to keep up? Well because the guys I went with were real partiers and I just thought “I should be able to do what they’re doing.” I guess. I dunno. They knew what they were doing kind-of-thing and I didn’t and I wanted to learn what to do—I just wanted to be part of it I guess. At that moment I don’t think I really had a clue as to how to do all the stuff that came along with going to a circuit party. (Alex)

As I listened to Alex reflect on how he felt about *real partiers*, I was reminded of Dale’s admonition to those who have problems with not understanding their drug use and risk becoming “messy” or, in the estimation of themselves and others, too high:

Russ: How does it make you feel when you see somebody who is messy?

Dale: I feel like they do not take the responsibility and that their friends are. I don’t like it. I feel like, “You know what? If you can’t party with the big boys, then don’t try. Don’t push your limits.” You gotta know and learn. People did not pay this amount of money to come and baby-sit you. You are old enough; you should be able to take care of yourself.

Dale’s ideas suggest that there is something else embedded in the consumption of drugs aside from a desire to avoid being stuck in a position of baby-sitting. Keeping up with *the*

*big boys* charts out a particularly gendered understanding of drug practices. When read against Alex's account, this begins to suggest that Alex's drug practice took place in relation to or through a desire to approximate a particular kind of identification associated with *the big boys*. Here, drug use is not merely about taking drugs, but also approximating a particular sexualised and gendered identity. In Alex's recollections—as with other interview subjects—is an account of bodily practice wedded to a desire to approximate a particular masculine image associated with the circuit—one exemplified, most clearly in *the look*.

Alex's account is, however, also useful for illustrating the way this identification is grounded in negation, exclusion, or disavowal. While his drug consumption was clearly tied into a desire to approximate a particular gendered sense of self, one made possible as he kept up with some *real partiers*—Alex's negotiations were also neatly tied to that which threatens—and therefore must be disavowed from—a gendered self-identification. Thus Alex's worst moment is not only about getting too high as he tried to approximate partying with the *real partiers*—perhaps, in his imagining, *big boys*—but it is also about being uncomfortable as his dance partner began to put his hands in Alex's pants: *I had no dick at that moment because I was like so high. I think I had like micro-phallus. And I was so embarrassed and I didn't want him touching me. And that made me more paranoid and uncomfortable.* In the context of an event that is so clearly about masculinity, the absence of that moniker most closely associated with masculinity—an erect, or at the very least functioning, penis—created a significant amount of anxiety for Alex: *so basically I excused myself from him. Or actually he went away and I went into this paranoid thing, thinking, "He went away because I had small dick." And I kind of got all weirded out.*

With this in mind, I later asked Alex how he felt about the use of Viagra in relation to circuit events. His response:

Love it. But I'm afraid of it actually. Because I think it's addictive in the sense that you begin to think that you need to take Viagra whenever you have sex. I found now that when I know that I'm going to have sex I'll take a Viagra. And I didn't need a Viagra to begin with and I don't have an impotence problem. I took a Viagra initially because when you take ecstasy it's hard to have an erection and I like dancing with an erection. I think it's sexy. I love having someone touch my dick, love showing off

my dick, touching my dick [laughter]. And so I don't want someone touching it when it's [like a pickle]. (Alex)

Alex's actions and thinking are as much about trying to approximate a particular look by embodying practices he and others associated with *the big boys* as they are also based on an attempt to reject, police, or disavow that which is not or cannot be the masculine subject. When it comes to a list of *everything that can epitomize male sexuality and being a man* the flaccid unresponsive penis is not likely to be found. It is, in fact, the antithesis of the masculinity associated with *the look* and the circuit more generally. In short, the sense of self realized through these approximations and disavowals suggests that it is a somewhat fragile, delicate creature—one in need of continual work and support.

### ***Women and the “Feminine Element”***

This work manifests itself in ways that are not directly about things so obviously associated with the male body. While speaking about the prospect of hanging out with people who he identifies as “non-circuit types”, Andy notes:

I just don't feel comfortable with them. I feel as if it is not my crowd. They are all dressed up and they are all queeny and they are all busy and their hands are in the air and I don't feel associated with that. (Andy)

Andy's sense of self is clearly produced in relation to what it is not: being *queeny* or being *all busy* with his hands. The masculinity realised through the circuit is marked not by its absolute presence or by its facticity, but by its relation to that which it is not: femininity. This is, however, more complex than a relational arrangement between the Neanderthal and the queen, between masculinity and femininity. The Neanderthal is produced through the exclusion and disavowal of what it is not; the Neanderthal relies on or requires the absent presence of that which is excluded. Andy's queen is a necessary—if subordinated and excluded—aspect of what makes the Neanderthal cohere or hold together as a possibility. There is a complex process where gendered identification occurs not only through an approximation of *the look*—to be intelligible requires that one play the discursive game as it is currently arranged—but also through the exclusion of that which is not—perhaps cannot be—*the look*. The Neanderthal is sensible only in relation to the queen—and she certainly does not have a micro-phallus.

There are at least two dimensions to this process of abjection. On the one hand there is a relatively consistent rejection of women as a class—or at least confusion at what a woman at a circuit event might want. On the other hand—and in no sense distinct from a desire to exclude women from the circuit—is a rejection of the *feminine element*. I asked Frank how he felt about women attending circuit events:

Women are totally in different world. They can't pick up on the gay male energy. That's what supports my theory that gay men are a different gender, a unique gender. There's something unique about our sexuality that's different from heterosexual men. So for women it would be impossible for them to pick up on that. (Frank)

This is not to suggest that women do not or cannot attend circuit events and Frank concedes there are:

straight women who come and they get it. There are straight women who do come and get it. We've had a ball sometimes at these dances with straight women. (Frank)

Indeed, Women attendees are quite conscious of the energy and nature of a circuit party:

Behind me is a small woman, petite, cute as a button. She's no more than 5'1", with cute short skirt and a brilliant blue sequined top. I smile at her, say hello. This," I gesture around us, "is beautiful." She smiles and in a wonderful, high-pitched sing-song voice replies "This is like paradise for me." And she pauses and says; "Except for one small thing" She holds her thumb and forefinger in a gesture of inconsequence and gives me another beautiful smile, "everyone here is gay!" (Fieldnotes 1999)

The crowd screams again when the performance ends and someone beside me gives a shrill whoop of approval. It's a woman and I'm half surprised. Shaking my head in disbelief over the production I say to her, "That was amazing!" She looks at me, smiles broadly, saying: "This is my definition of heaven." I smile and agree. And then she pauses, smiles, and continues, "Wait a minute. That's a bit ironic coming from a straight woman." (Fieldnotes 1999)

There is, however, an undercurrent of hostility in how women are perceived within the circuit space. This is particularly apparent in Peter's concerns:

No women. I *hate* that because I'm not attracted to women so I don't want them there. And this is *my* energy and part of that is the sexual energy and women are just bringing it down. (Peter)

In considering whom a circuit event is for, a degree of what could only be understood as misogyny clearly emerges. While I would not wish to minimize this misogyny, the desire



to exclude women is, to a large degree, contingent on the pursuit of sex. In some respects, Peter's desire to exclude women from circuit events extends from the sexual purpose and intent that threads its way through the motivations of the gay men who attend:

If they stood there and left me alone, that's fine—as long as they are not in my face or bugging me or something like that—like coming up and dancing with me or trying to touch me. (Dale)

I don't mind it when there are girls but they have to know what's going on with the guys. Sometimes when you go to the mixed parties, the girls can bother you—touching you all the time, trying to kiss you, trying to convince you to have sex with them. And they start going “Oh you are looking so good.” And I'm not interested. (Andy)

As Bill points out, a circuit party is an event that:

attracts hundreds or thousands of gay men who would be going to the party to meet other gay men, get together, have fun, take drugs. And have sex. Which is why I see it as a boy thing. (Bill)

Tom's comments round this out:

I've had several different women—when I went to get a drink or something—they hit on me and I've had women dance with me with their tops off and rub their breasts against me. And all I'm thinking is, “It's not really working for me but if it's working for you, well, party on.” I found that kind of jarring because it's not your mind-space at all. (Tom)

An interest or focus on sex is certainly not the only reason motivating attendance, but it does serve as a larger backdrop, and women's presence, most obviously, does not have much resonance for attendees in light of this interest.

Even among those who express an interest in seeing women at circuit events, there is an understanding that there is little space for women. Marc likes:

variety. I like to see lesbians, I like to see straight people, I like to see couples, I like to see costumes and lights and everything else is great—a couple guys in leather is great. The whole schlemiel—the whole thing—I like to see people dancing. (Marc)

At the same time, he is equally conscious that *there's no room for straight girls*:

I remember mentioning to a friend of mine—who is a girl—that she would have loved what we saw in Orlando. But she would be scared by that too—because there's no room for straight girls—let me tell you that. (Marc)

In short, women would not be particularly missed if they did not attend.

As attendees spoke about women's attendance, other related themes reflecting concerns about boundaries emerged:

The perfume and the feminine element, girls taking up too much room on the dance floor and being pushy, throwing their hair around—I don't like that. (Bill)

And I'm not sure if this was segued into the following comment, or if something else came along before it, but then Max mentioned women at these events and there was general agreement with what followed: "Can you imagine anything worse than a woman on ecstasy? With their hair and then when they're high they are all over the place." (Fieldnotes 2000, Max)

For Bill and Max, it is not merely that women's sexual energy does not resonate with the expectations gay men have about the circuit, but that women exceed their bounds: they are *all over the place* and *taking up too much room on the dance floor and being pushy*.

While not wishing to dismiss the gross misogyny embedded in these assessments, what is analytically interesting is that this concern with boundaries and their transgression is not necessarily used to police women's participation. Attendees, however, do use it to police the excesses of the *feminine element*, as other gay men express it:

He's tall—taller than me—and really lean. Probably a bit younger too. He's having fun dancing—although I'm not sure who he's with. And all over the place. Arms in the air, doing some sort of Whitney Houston or Celine Dion thing mixed up with a Ru Paul sashay. He reaches out to touch the stage/podium thing in front of him and then does this stripper pose, arching his back, looks over his shoulder, spins around and throws his hands in the air. He's happy as hell—and so *very gay*. A guy beside me has been watching him—turns to me and says, "Can you believe that girl? I hate that." (Fieldnotes 2002)

The process of policing the unwanted feminine element emerged in other ways. When I asked Alex how he prepared for circuit events he chose to turn the tables on me and proceeded to ask: *So how do you prepare for circuit parties?* After a moment of surprise—I made a point of framing interviews as a conversation but never really anticipated an interview subject asking about my own practices—I replied:

Russell: Not too much interested in the whole clothing thing anymore. It wasn't a big deal before—no I'm lying—it was. But now I'm just more

likely to wear a pair of jeans and forget about it. The shirt is coming off so why bother with anything more than a T-shirt?

Alex: It's interesting eh? That seems to be with most people.

Russell: I'm likely to bring a bit of leather and I really likely to wear this big chain.

Alex: Chain?

Russell: This really big thick chain that I wear—it's from a hardware store, the kind you might lock up your bike with or tow a car or something. I didn't realise it at first, but it gets me an enormous amount of attention. It's surprising how often a big boy will come up and hold on to it and say something like, "I really like your chain," and then things go from there. Once I figured it out that I could use this to "work it", I've never been without it.

While transcribing Alex's interview, I initially chose not to include this portion of the conversation, insofar as it was about the researcher and seemed somewhat solipsistic. On later reflection, and in relation to subsequent fieldnotes, it seemed to merit attention as it helps highlight other ways in which a sense of masculinity is policed and produced through an exclusion of the *feminine element*:

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a couple of guys giggling at something and looking over their shoulders. Behind them was this smaller gay boy, thin, fey, and dressed in a tight crop top. He was a waif if I ever saw one—could have been one of those elegant runway models—all arms and legs and long long strides full of attitude. Around his waist was the thinnest silver chain. It clasped together in the middle of his lower back, and a small strand of it ran down the crack of his ass and disappeared into his slinky tight hip-huggers. One of the giggling boys looked at me, looked at the waif, and then grabbed my chain. "This is much more masculine—I love this chain—it's way more masculine than her little tennis bracelet." (Fieldnotes 2001)

I would be lying if I said I did not experience a frisson of delight in this confirmation. At the same time, I am equally aware that this was also an exercise in policing—excluding *the feminine element*—from the circuit experience. Not only was this smaller boy policed—as one who falls outside the normative conventions associated with gender—but so too was I.

Thus, while the *Neanderthal-like* masculinity is a central component of the circuit experience, it is important to note that its realization is premised on the exclusion of that which is feminine and as such is an arrangement premised on abjection. Differently, the

unwanted queen or *feminine element* is a constituent part of the circuit's articulation of masculinity. Frank's comments are powerful and perceptive in this regard:

And it's interesting because it would be, yeah I don't want girls there, I don't want that. But when you do have those elements there they kind of shake it up a little bit and you appreciate your own space more when those elements are there. (Frank)

I take Frank's comment to mean that the *feminine element*—while unwanted—is very present in its absence. That which is feminine is held in abeyance as it forms the constitutive outside of what it means to attend the circuit, to be a party boy: the unwanted *feminine element* is therefore central to the circuit and the sense of being a man.

In conjunction, the stories attendees—myself included—offer as they negotiate through an identification based on a process of approximation as well as a process of rejection function to illustrate how a wide variety of practices associated with the body are embedded in the exclusionary logic of the heterosexual economy of desire. This is, of course, crystallized most clearly in Alex's account of his worst experience. Here we witness what I think is a piece of the puzzle of practice in relation to the circuit. For those most interested in questions about healthy practice—drug use and (its intersection with) unsafe sex—this mode of identification through approximation and negation represents a very different starting point for intervention or prevention. At no point could intervention be limited to cognitive considerations or structural changes—given that practice is at the intersection of a larger social order and the body.

## Conclusion

Despite the utility of Butler's ideas—particularly the heterosexual economy of desire and her performative thesis—her work also brings with it some conceptual baggage I would like to avoid. Her framework—and a radical social constructionist paradigm more generally—posits a subject:

who can resist the power of such discursive constrictions, build new sexual communities, forge liberating subcultures and define value systems that respect diversity and choice. The radical social constructionist denial that there is anything given or natural in sexual organs and human sexuality corresponds to the goal of radical sexual politics: the full realization of all human potentialities, complete autonomy, and total

liberation from norms and restrictions. (Rival, Slater and Miller 1998: 295)

Some academics interested in gender politics and equity have attempted to think about this liberation through the notion of transgression. The logic is as follows: the discursive and social systems that produce identity are inherently unfair insofar as they constrain human potential and freedom. If it might be illustrated that identity is premised on constructing and maintaining boundaries through processes of abjection and exclusion then that set of boundaries—and the systems upon which it is based—might be revealed for what they are: arbitrary configurations of power. This understanding of gendered and sexual identity assumes a “utopian and transgressive use of sexuality” and is at the heart of—and perhaps emerged from—queer theory (Rival, Slater, and Miller 1998: 297).

“Queer theory is suggesting that the study of homosexuality should not be the study of a minority—the making of the lesbian/gay/bisexual subject—but a study of those knowledges and social practices that organise ‘society’ as a whole by sexualising—heterosexualizing or homosexualizing—bodies, desires, acts, identities, social relations, knowledges, culture, and social institutions” (Seidman 1996: 13). A definitive assessment of queer theory is difficult—stemming partially from its postmodern roots resisting, as postmodernism does, any sort of classification. Stein and Plummer (1996), in defining queer theory, suggest the following hallmarks. First, a conceptualisation of sexuality that sees sexual power embodied in different levels of social life, expressed discursively, and enforced through boundaries and binary dualisms. Second, the problematization of identity categories as contingent and contested at best. Third, a rejection of civil rights strategies for identity politics in favour of transgressive approaches, and fourth, a willingness to interrogate areas that might not initially be understood as sexual. Seidman, in *Difference Troubles: Queering Social Theory and Sexual Politics* (1997), suggests

Queer theory is less a matter of explaining the repression or expression of a homosexual minority than an analysis of the hetero/homosexual figure as a power/knowledge regime that shapes the ordering of desires, behaviours, and social institutions, and social relations [...] by imposing sexual definitions on bodies, actions and social relations, but perhaps more significantly by shaping broad categories of thought and culture whose thematic focus is not always explicitly sexual. (P. 150)

Lesbian and gay theory has been wedded to the idea of the formation of a homosexual subject and its mobilization to challenge a heteronormative society. Queer theory has abandoned the notion of a stable or coherent homosexual subject. In abandoning the homosexual subject as the foundation of theory and politics, queer theorists take the hetero/homosexual discursive figure as its object of knowledge and critique, outlining how it shapes thought and social convention. Queer theory tries to show how this binary serves as a global framework “within which bodies, desires, identities, behaviours, and social relations are constituted and regulated” (Seidman 1997: 154). What is offered through queer theory is a politics of knowledge, revealing how the discursive category of the heterosexual/homosexual binary structures and invests discourses and representations that are at the centre of Western societies. A queer politics of knowledge aims at displacing or decentring the social force of this cultural figure, tracing “the cultural operation of the hetero-homo hierarchical figure with the aim of reversing and disturbing its infectious and pervasive social power” (Seidman 1997: 154). In deconstructing this figure, the goal is to refigure identity as fluid or multiple, producing a more stable and mature identity politics—one that reflects the actualities of sexual subjectivity as contingent and fragmented.

For Butler and many of those informed by this queer turn, this deconstruction might be best exemplified—indeed as has been argued in Chapter One may *be*—through parody or resignifying practices of the body via transgression. While wishing to adhere to a social constructionist position—indeed even a radical social constructionist position—I do not believe that the notion of transgression, as a strategy for change or as an analytical tool is particularly useful—especially in the context of the circuit. This approach to sexuality and identity is problematic in that it represents a “peculiarly Western objectification of sexuality” (Rival, Slater, and Miller 1998: 296). The “utopian and transgressive use of sexuality” depends on an *a priori* conceptual construction of sexuality which functions to elide and confuse the nature of lived practice. Butler’s radical social constructionist paradigm contains within it a conceptual order positing that identity is constructed in relation to a heterosexist arrangement of sex, gender and desire and that any deviation from this order is understood as an act that is necessarily open to—though, as Butler points out, does not always effect—transgressive interpretations.

That Butler understands deviation as potential transgression is, however, a logical extension of the objectivist model and the conceptual terrain she offers and *not* of lived practice. To assume that any deviation from the heterosexual economy of desire is an act which somehow reveals the arbitrary nature of that economy is to adhere to an objectivist model of practice. Differently, one might assume such a transgressive interpretation and effect if one began with the model of practice Butler (1990) articulates and champions in *Gender Trouble*. In Bourdieu's language, this transgressive interpretation and effect are artefacts of the objectivist social constructionist model of identity and exists "only for the absolute gaze of the omniscient omnipresent spectator, who, thanks to his knowledge of the social mechanics, is able to be present at the different states of the cycle" (Bourdieu 1990a: 98).

In a recent assessment of the circuit and the circuit body, Bardella (2002) makes just such a mistake. He observes, with clear *conceptual* accuracy, that the circuit body—as an example of the gay muscled body—destabilises and transgresses masculinity in its eroticisation of gender sameness:

One of the most astonishing sites of a 'circuit party' is the materiality of thousands of masculinized 'buffed' bodies intermingling and intertwined in a vast network of (not so masculine) gestures and embraces, adorned by macho as well as camp accessories. In parody-ing the masculine body, the 'circuit queen' transgresses conventional masculinity, subverts the traditional codes of representation, and creates opportunities for narcissistic self-identification. (Bardella, 2002: 87)

While one might wonder as to how self-identification could be anything but narcissistic, Bardella's commentary flies in the face of how circuit attendees seem to understand their circuit experience. On the topic of transgression, one only has to return to the *leçon de choses* I learned in light of my conversation with Brian about Butler's notion of drag-as-parody and glitter:

"Glitter ain't any sort of subversion or parody. It's effeminising and actually reaffirms that we're all a bunch of girls." The heterosexual economy of desire doesn't fall apart in the face of fun or irony or parody—it congeals. (Fieldnotes 1999, Brian)

Parody and resignification can, in spectacular ways, undermine or transgress a larger heteronormative order—there is no denying the troubling nature of transgression.

However, while transgression—and the radical social constructionist framework in which

it is embedded—may make sense to those observers informed by such a model of identification, those engaged as a throng of men with their hands in the air—and despite the *(not so masculine) gestures and embraces*—are just as likely to understand their gestures and embraces as part of what Frank understood as a bonding among gay men, and Brian called a *celebration of male's or men's bodies* (Brian, Fieldnotes 2000).

Clearly, insofar as the circuit is about masculinity, the logic of gender embedded in Butler's notion of the heterosexual economy of desire is productive in trying to understand how attendees experience and practice their gendered sense of self. But to carry a radical social constructionist framework to its transgressive conclusion hardly resonates with the circuit experience. I would contend that it hardly resonates with most lived experience; the circuit attendees interviewed hardly understood themselves as transgressive figures and few could be characterized as thinking about a radical "realization of all human potentialities, complete autonomy, and total liberation from norms and restrictions" (Rival, Slater and Miller 1998: 295). And while a circuit attendee may call himself a circuit queen, this is not transgressive. It is a policing gesture, one that secures the boundaries of what it means to be a man—despite any play that might take place across the borders of gender. *It's effeminising and actually reaffirms that we're all a bunch of girls.*

In raising this critique, I wish to resist:

the degree to which a philosophical discussion of the logical implications of social constructionism become conflated with our attempt to understand the practice of gender. Merely recognising the 'what could be' distorts our understanding because it pushes us toward an emphasis upon the extreme potentiality of aspects of gender such as sexuality as performance. (Rival, Slater and Miller 1998: 315)

Thus while I use Butler's notion of the heterosexual economy of desire to help frame the observation that circuit attendees develop a sense of self and community on the basis of who and what they are not—and that this process is subtly coded through a heterosexist logic—I do not wish to adopt a rarefied objectified notion of sexuality and the "utopian and transgressive" potentials linked to this notion. "By returning to the comparative examination of gender and sexuality in specific cultural contexts we return to the central task of empathic understanding of what most people do" (Rival, Slater and Miller 1998: 315). By framing the circuit as field embedded within a broader heterosexual economy of



desire, it becomes possible to begin accounting for the normative structure of that cultural context and much of the gender ideals that operate within it. It is for *this* reason—and not necessarily the “utopian and transgressive” potential that holds Butler’s broader conceptual framework together—that I have chosen to think about the circuit as a field of objective social relations that is, in turn, embedded in a broader heterosexual economy of desire.

## Theoretical Interlude 3

### Thinking Theory Through the Circuit

By framing the field of power in terms of the heterosexual economy of desire, the analysis put forth in Chapter 5 was an implicit consideration of what Bourdieu (2001) calls the *paradox of doxa*—how normative and hierarchical social organizations are maintained, for the most part, without recourse to violence or overt control on the part of the dominant sectors of the social world or resistance on the part of the dominated. As outlined in Chapter 5, this process of legitimation emerges in the context of the circuit experience as pro-gay critics argue for particular ways of engaging with the circuit and as attendees minimize *the look*. Such interpretations—and the actions based on those interpretations—function, in the end, to perpetuate a larger normative order that privileges some bodily configurations and expressions over others. In choosing to focus on these two modes of classificatory struggle, I am obviously suggesting that these interpretations—academic or otherwise—are, at some level, problematic.

Ontologically and epistemologically, critics of the circuit limit their analysis to the way the structure and meaning of the circuit inform practice and identification. Attendees—in their negotiation through *the look*—understand practice in terms of the subject's ability to exercise agency in light of these structures. These classificatory struggles are limited: stories—of any kind—about *brotherhood* or *bonding* need to be

tempered with an understanding that the circuit experience has a subtle logic which not only privileges some over others but also functions to support a larger normative order that is not easily identified from within the circuit experience. While the types of classificatory struggles are obviously more numerous than the two modes I have chosen to focus on, and the connections between classification and differential social positioning are manifold, the mode of inequality I am most interested in, and the mode of inequality that I believe the circuit is most intimately connected to—indeed made possible by—is a heterosexist or heteronormative ordering of sex, gender, and desire. Through the circuit experience, the larger heterosexual economy of desire is perpetuated with the assistance of those whom it regulates.

In Chapter 6, I drew on the voices of attendees, with knowledge of this larger “theoretical ensemble”—made possible by drawing on Butler—as a means of charting out some of the contours of this economy of desire in practice. I also highlighted how identifications based on this economy of desire involve both an approximation of what masculine identification is and a negation of what such identification cannot be. I closed Chapter 6 by pointing out that the transgressive aspects of Butler’s theorising are less important for the purposes of this analysis—and indeed, do not seem to resonate with the normative aspects of the circuit experience—than is her argument that gender and sexual identification are, in effect, overdetermined by heteronormative ideals. In effect then, the analysis of the “theoretical ensemble” of the circuit in Chapter 5—and its elaboration in Chapter 6—is an application of Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic violence to Butler’s notion of the heterosexual economy of desire.

Bringing Butler and Bourdieu together to think about gender identification is not, of course, a particularly novel act on my part. In both *Excitable Speech* (1997) and in her contribution to Shusterman’s *Bourdieu: A Critical Reader* (1999) Butler in fact interrogates aspects of Bourdieu’s analytical framework. At the same time, in *Masculine Domination* Bourdieu (2001) explores masculine gendered identification and makes a brief critical gesture toward Butler’s performative thesis. In light of the critical stance Butler and Bourdieu have in relation to each other, the attempt on my part to suggest their synthesis may seem contradictory. It might be successfully argued that at a fundamental level, both thinkers reject each other’s basic ontological and epistemological

tenets and as such, a synthesis is impossible. Moreover, in light of the fact that Bourdieu's analysis of gender identification is based on over 30 years of very compelling research and writing, it might be argued that such a synthesis is both impertinent and unnecessary.

There is, I argue, a novel contribution to be made by considering these mutual interrogations and critiques—a contribution that becomes particularly clear in light of some of the central aspects of the circuit experience. While bringing the notion of the field of power and the heterosexual economy of desire to bear upon the circuit experience is useful to understand practice and outline how the circuit experience is implicated in the legitimation of a doxic heteronormative order, it is equally important to understand how the body and bodily experience are part and parcel of the practice associated with the circuit. What role does the body—its facticity, its ineffability—play in both practice and the legitimation of the doxa? This question is compelling, given that neither thinker's approach to the body—upon close consideration against the backdrop of the circuit experience—seems consistent. What emerges is a series of slippages in how each thinker uses the body in accounting for practice and identification. Thus, in closing this research project, I consider how these two thinkers approach to the body, using the circuit experience as a means of deepening their conceptualizations of the body and its role in practice and identification.

Overall, I do this by thinking about each thinker's reactions to the other—focusing, in particular, on how each thinker uses the body in their analysis. I do this from several angles. First, I outline Butler's engagement with Bourdieu's work—found in both *Excitable Speech* (1997) and her contribution to *Bourdieu: A Critical Reader* (1999). I follow this with my own considerations of her assessment of Bourdieu's weaknesses, suggesting that Butler makes some subtle but significant slips in her conceptualization of the body that function to undermine her argument. Second, I turn to Bourdieu's engagement with Butler. Unlike Butler, whose engagement with Bourdieu is an interrogation of his theorizing, Bourdieu's critique of Butler is much more circumspect. It emerges less through direct engagement with Butler's work as it is an effect of the analysis of gender identification and male domination he puts forth in *Masculine Domination* (2001). After outlining Bourdieu's critique of Butler I move to a discussion

of how his analysis in *Masculine Domination* (2001) is an expression of this critique. I then offer some consideration of his analysis and suggest he, like Butler, makes some subtle slips in the way he uses the body.

These slips are less an effect of how Butler and Bourdieu conceptualize the body as they are an effect of the the role each thinker gives to the body in their accounts of identity and practice. Both thinkers use the body as a means of bridging agency and structure. By using the body in what amounts to a utilitarian move—as a means to an end—neither thinker creates much room to consider how the body might be an active, agentic force in its own right. Drawing on fieldnotes and interview data, I argue that while a synthesis between the two thinkers might be productive for thinking about the links between practice, identification, symbolic violence, and the heterosexual economy of desire, neither thinker—nor a synthesis of the two—is able to pick up on an important aspect of the circuit experience. These two frameworks gloss over the role that social recognition plays in the circuit. I close by suggesting that social recognition is a profoundly bodily process turning to Axel Honneth’s (1995) concept of the desire for recognition to make this point. I close by reflecting on how this concept, in conjunction with the notion field and heterosexual economy of desire represents a means of thinking about identification and practice in ways that are bodily.

### **Butler on Bourdieu**

In her critique of Bourdieu, Butler (1997, 1999) considers “what gives a linguistic utterance the force to do what it says, or to facilitate a set of effects as a result of what it says” (Butler 1997: 146). Here, Butler engages Bourdieu on a conceptual terrain she has thoroughly marked as her own: the relationship between practice, change, and the performative. In Bourdieu’s account of performative speech acts, the “performative will or will not work depending on whether the subject who performs the utterance is already authorized to make it work by the position of social power she or he occupies” (Butler 1997: 156). The efficacy of a subject’s speech to name or make change emerges from his or her position within a particular field and the relationship he or she has to the various forms of capital immanent in that field. Speech—and practice more generally—is thus an effect of authority. Butler, however, wonders how change could be made by subjects who are either at the margins or outside the margins of social power. How are calls for justice

or democracy heard when they are spoken by those who have historically been excluded from both? How is it, for example, that the terms “queer”, “First Nations”, or “woman”—terms that mark a considerable lack of authority—become rallying cries that have effects? “The question here is whether the improper use of the performative can succeed in producing the effect of authority where there is no recourse to a prior authorization” (Butler 1999: 124).

For Butler then, Bourdieu’s approach is unable to account for effective or novel practice that comes from those without some recourse to capital. This inability stems from the fact that his notion of habitus—as the major conceptual tool he uses to explain practice—is unconnected to any consideration of performativity. He “fails to take account of the way in which social positions are themselves constructed through a tacit operation of performativity” and how “[the] authorization [to speak/act] more generally is to a strong degree a matter of being addressed or interpolated by prevailing forms of social power” (Butler 1997: 156). For Butler, Bourdieu’s scant consideration of the way in which the habitus is also a performative effect means that indeterminacy is not incorporated into the way the habitus is conceptualised. As a consequence, Butler argues Bourdieu’s account of social power “remains structurally committed to the status quo” (Butler 1997: 156, Jenkins 1992, Shilling 1997a, 1997b). Action is possible only in relation to what is already present. In order to account for innovation and change, an adequate theory of practice requires, for Butler, a way of thinking about the indeterminacy or failure inherent in the constitution of a subject’s identification.

Thinking of habitus as a performative effect allows for a means of speaking to this indeterminacy and account for the sort of agency Bourdieu’s analytical framework cannot. Recall for Butler effective or innovative practice does not necessarily emerge as an effect of one’s position within a social field or institutional context—as the reappropriation of, and the political mobilization under, the term “queer”, “First Nations”, or “woman” illustrates. The agency associated with the disenfranchised or marginalized is to be found in power’s ever-present failure in constituting a worldview once and for all. Our worldview—and this includes our habitus, as the schemes of perception and appreciation, of vision and division, through which we classify the world—is formed through social norms. This formation, however, is always incomplete

insofar as these norms are arbitrary and must be enforced through repetition. This process of enforced repetition contains an inherent risk of failure in light of the fact that coherence requires reiteration and repetition. While power is always already everywhere, it is also bound to failure. It is in this constitutive failure of power to fully encode a particular version of reality that novel, innovative, or effective practice emerges.

It is, however, at this point in her account that Butler (1997) begins to traffic in contradictions. In relation to the performative construction of the body, she writes:

The body, however, is not simply the sedimentation of speech acts by which it has been constituted. If that constitution fails, a resistance meets interpellation at the moment it exerts its demand; then something exceeds the interpellation, and this excess is lived as the outside of intelligibility [...]. This excess is what Bourdieu's account appears to miss or, perhaps, to suppress: the abiding incongruity of the speaking body, the way in which it exceeds its interpellation, and remains uncontained by any of its acts of speech. (P. 155)

In previous analyses, Butler (1990, 1993, 1995) works hard to banish the idea of a world before discourse. In light of these efforts, any suggestion that practice can be accounted for by something that “exceeds the interpellation” of discourse or the notion of a “speaking body” suppressed by discourse requires some careful consideration. If we assume she is not backtracking from an argument with which she has become identified, then a question necessarily emerges: What is this “excess” that is “uncontained” by the “acts of speech”?

Butler would dissuade us from interpreting this excess as some sort of polymorphously perverse essence that squeaks through discourse. Under the performative thesis, all aspects of identity—including the body and its morphology—are *effects* of discourse and power. There is nothing before the word; “there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of the body” (Butler 1997: 10). For Butler, it is not that the body comes before discourse or the social. Rather, what we might interpret as the body exceeding discourse is actually power's failure to fully constitute the body once and for all and that it is in this incomplete constitution of bodies and social relations that we find change and innovation. Yet, even in her own radically linguistic interpretation, the body seems to exceed (her own explanatory) discourse: “In such bodily productions reside the sedimented history of the performative, the ways in

which sedimented usage comes to compose, without determining, the cultural sense of the body, and *how the body comes to disorient that cultural sense* in the moment of expropriating the discursive means of its own production” (Butler 1997: 159, my emphasis). Here, as “the body comes to disorient” the “cultural sense of the body”, as the body claims the means of its “own production”, we see Butler struggling over the limits of the power she attributes to language—there is a body, somewhere, exceeding the limits of discursive power rather than being constructed by or through it. This struggle indexes or highlights the (necessary?) presence of that which she actively resists—a body that is not entirely contained or produced by language and power, an ineffable body only poorly captured through representation.

I read this slippage in two ways. On the one hand, I read it as evidence of the difficulty we have in speaking about and making sense of the body’s ineffability, on the way bodily experience resists the subject’s capacity to reflect on and categorize that bodily experience: *The best I could say was that it was like bliss. You can’t explain this to anyone unless they’ve been here. I tried to tell my friends about this and it just didn’t work.* On the other hand, I also read it as evidence of the difficulty in thinking with or through bodily experience on the way to an account of identification and practice. In short while Butler constructs an argument where the linguistic body is central to identification and practice, there is a tendency to slip on something much fleshier buried beneath the underbrush of discourse.

## **Bourdieu on Butler**

Bourdieu’s reaction to Butler’s critique is much more circumspect than her engagement with Bourdieu’s work. In light of Bourdieu’s tendency to make his contributions to social science through the analysis of an actual object—rather than ruminate on either his own or another’s theory—this is to be expected. Thus, it is in the application of his notion of relational thinking to gender identification in *Masculine Domination* (2001) that Bourdieu provides a response to Butler’s critique. The language he uses in his analysis strongly suggests that he had Butler in mind; as Rooney (2001) suggests, *Masculine Domination* (2001) appears to be a means for Bourdieu “to address and to outflank Judith Butler’s work.” Bourdieu (2001) argues the social construction of gender identification and the body



is far more than a strictly *performative* operation of naming which orients and structures *representations*, starting with representations of the body; it is brought about and culminates in a profound and durable transformation of bodies (and minds) that is to say, in and through a process of practical construction imposing *differentiated definitions* of the legitimate uses of the body, in particular sexual ones, which tends to exclude from the universe of the feasible and thinkable everything that marks membership of the other gender [...] to produce the social artefact of the manly man and the womanly woman. (P. 23, original emphasis)

Thus like Butler, Bourdieu takes as his focus “the social definition of the body, and especially the sexual organs”, exploring how “the naturalization of that construction takes place” (Bourdieu 2001: 22). Where he parts with Butler is, as Rooney (2001) notes, in the emphasis he places on the role the “formidable collective labour of diffuse and continuous socialization” in the embodiment of habitus rather than in the compulsion to reiterate discursively organized gendered ideals (Bourdieu 2001: 23). For Bourdieu, gender identification is not a performative effect; it is an effect of the inculcation of relational differences and the social organization in bodies as habitus. His stance on Butler’s performative thesis is particularly apparent near the end of *Masculine Domination*:

Finally, and above all, it [a relational analysis to gender identification] forces one to see the futility of the strident calls of ‘postmodern’ philosophers for the ‘suppression of dualisms’. These dualisms, deeply rooted in things (structures) and in bodies, do not spring from a simple effect of verbal naming, and cannot be abolished by an act of performative magic, since the genders, far from being simple ‘roles’ that can be played at will (in the manner of ‘drag queens’), are inscribed in bodies and in a universe from which they derive their strength. It is the order of genders that underlies the performative efficacy of words—and especially insults—and it is also the order of genders that resists the spuriously revolutionary redefinitions of subversive voluntarism” (Bourdieu 2001: 103).

The references to Butler are numerous: dualisms, verbal naming, performative magic, the drag queen, and the argument about the nature of performative efficacy are issues and terms Butler has made hers throughout both her analysis and, in particular, her critique of Bourdieu.

In resisting what he reads as an account of gender identification that is constrained in its focus on discursive effects—“verbal naming”—Bourdieu (2001)

mounts his own analysis, limiting his substantive focus to that of masculine domination. For Bourdieu masculine domination is a quintessential example of the *paradox of doxa*, the fact that “the established order, its relations of domination, its rights and prerogatives, privileges and injustices ultimately perpetuates itself so easily, apart from a few historical accidents, and that the most intolerable conditions of existence can so often be perceived as acceptable and even natural” (Bourdieu 2001: 1). As a means of unpacking this paradox, and in effect accounting for gendered identification and practice, Bourdieu (2001) relies on his well developed notion of symbolic violence: “masculine domination, and the way it is imposed and suffered [is] the prime example of this paradoxical submission, an effect of what I call symbolic violence” (p. 1).

In both *Masculine Domination* (2001) and *Distinction* (1984) Bourdieu relies on the notion of habitus as a means of explaining how symbolic violence operates in the legitimation of the doxa. The relationship between habitus and social relations is circular: “field and habitus are locked in a circular relationship. Involvement in a field shapes the habitus that, in turn shapes the actions that reproduce the field” (Crossley 2001a: 87). Thus, the legitimation of doxa depends on the embodiment of those doxic social relations in the form of schemas of perception and appreciation, in the forms of ways of seeing and classifying, of vision and division that subjects use to live through the world (Bourdieu 1984, 1998, 2001). It is in this fashion that doxic social orders are replicated with the consent of subjects living in the same social conditions.

Throughout his analysis of masculine domination as symbolic violence, Bourdieu works diligently to distance the concept of habitus from a “language of consciousness” (Bourdieu 2001: 41). For example, he argues the operation of the habitus is not linked to cognitive processes—but rather operates through the body:

The passions of the dominated habitus [...] are not of the kind that can be suspended by a simple effort of will, founded on a libratory awakening of consciousness. If it is quite illusory to believe that symbolic violence can be overcome with the weapons of consciousness and will alone, this is because the effect and conditions of its efficacy are durably and deeply embedded in the body in the form of dispositions. (Bourdieu 2001: 39)

And elsewhere he writes:

The language of the ‘imaginary’ which one sees used somewhat recklessly here and there is even more redundant than that of ‘consciousness’ in as

much as it inclines one in particular to forget that the dominant principle of vision is not a simple mental representation, a fantasy ('ideas in people's heads'), and ideology, but a system of structures durably embedded in things and in bodies. (Bourdieu 2001: 41)

If we are to accept Bourdieu's argument, it is clear that the habitus does not rest in or rely on the mind or consciousness—the habitus is not a cognitive structure. It is, effectively, the social world lived through and embedded in—perhaps *as*—the body. This conceptualization of the habitus manifests itself in Bourdieu's account of social change: "Because the foundations of symbolic violence lie not in mystified consciousnesses [...] the relation of complicity that the victims of symbolic domination grant to the dominant can only be broken through a radical transformation of the social conditions of production of the dispositions" (Bourdieu 2001: 42).

The point I wish to highlight here is that as Bourdieu relies on the habitus, he is, in fact, relying on the body and bodily experiences—social relations embodied as dispositions—as a means of negotiating through the pitfalls of a structuralist "social physics" on the one hand, and an interpretive social phenomenology on the other hand (Crossley 2001b). When Bourdieu speaks about the relationship between the habitus and social structures he is arguing the habitus is social organization, deposited as schemes of perception and appreciation left in the body, operating pre-reflectively, below the level of conscious decision, as a bodily *feel* for—and not a reflection on—the game. Recall the definition of the subject's habitus: "an active residue or sediment of his [sic] past that functions within his [sic] present, shaping his [sic] perceptions, thoughts, and actions and thereby molding social practices in a regular way. It consists in dispositions, schemes, forms of know-how and competence, all of which function *below the threshold of consciousness*" (Crossley 2001a: 83, emphasis added).

By arguing the genesis of practice lies "below the threshold of consciousness", that practice cannot be understood in terms of a "language of consciousness", I do not believe Bourdieu, in doing so, is turning to the notion of the *unconscious* in his analysis. Differently, to argue dispositions operating below the threshold of consciousness determine practice is not the same as suggesting that these dispositions are grounded in a psychic structure akin to the Freudian id or super-ego. In fact, I would argue Bourdieu uses the notion of habitus to *overcome* the notion of the unconscious. "The infinite yet

strictly limited generative capacity [of the habitus] is difficult to understand only so long as one remains locked in the usual antinomies—which the concept of the habitus aims to *transcend*—of determinism and freedom, conditioning and creativity, consciousness and *unconscious*, or the individual and society” (1990a: 55, emphasis added). Indeed, what Bourdieu derisively refers to as the “hypnotic notion of the unconscious”, as a psychic structure, is incommensurable with the analytical framework he develops (Bourdieu 1977: 203 n40). He writes, “Asserting the universality and eternity of the logical categories that govern ‘the unconscious activity of the mind’, [...] ignores the dialectic of social structures and structured, structuring dispositions through which schemes of thought are formed and transformed” (Bourdieu 1990a: 41).

None of this is to suggest that Bourdieu does not use the term unconscious—he does, throughout his work (Bourdieu 1977, 1984, 1990a, 2001). Moreover, this is not to suggest that Bourdieu rejects the utility—and perhaps validity—of a Freudian-esque unconscious-as-psychic structure, as he occasionally makes oblique references of this nature (as an aside, I would suggest that the degree to which he sees the term as useful is at least debatable). It is my argument that in using the term unconscious Bourdieu does not do so to index a psychic structure characterizing the mind of the subject. Rather, for Bourdieu the “hypnotic power of the notion of the unconscious” is in actuality part of a socio-historical process whereby historical actions are forgotten—perhaps hidden—and naturalized through relations of power (Bourdieu 1977: 203 n40) “The ‘unconscious’, which enables one to dispense with this interrelating, [between habitus and field] is never anything other than *the forgetting of history which history itself produces* by realizing the objective structures that it generates in the quasi-natures of habitus” (1990a: 56, emphasis added). Here, forgetting is a socio-historical effect and process—not a structure embedded in the subject’s psyche. In the same discussion Bourdieu argues that practice can only be accounted for “by relating the social conditions in which the habitus that generated them was constituted, to the social conditions in which it is implemented, that is, through the scientific work of performing the interrelationships of these states of the social world that the habitus performs, *while concealing it, in and through practice*” (1990a: 56, emphasis added). Here, the intersection and machinations of habitus and field—the determinism of habitus and field—as practice are concealed in their doing. As

a “forgetting of history” or a concealment of the social conditions and processes through which the habitus “that generated them was constituted”, it is clear that Bourdieu’s notion of unconscious has less to do with psychic structures than it does with socio-historical processes.

Thus, when Bourdieu writes, “‘Communication of consciousnesses’ presupposes a community of ‘unconsciousnesses’ (that is, of linguistic and cultural competences)” he is not invoking a psychic structure where repressed memories or anxieties are stored (Bourdieu 1990a: 58). Rather, in making the claim that communication between agents (between different “consciousnesses”) depends on a community of “unconsciousnesses”, he is arguing that a collectivity—a community—of subjects is able to interact by virtue of a shared social know-how—that is, the embodied dispositions born out of living through the same social conditions that allow a subject to move through a social field, that allow a subject to feel for the game. For Bourdieu then, to suggest that practice has its genesis below the threshold of consciousness is not to suggest that it resides in the *unconscious*—it is to suggest that the genesis of practice is to be found in embodied ways of knowing, perceiving, and acting deposited and consequently forgotten or concealed in the body—as habitus—“in and through practice” (Bourdieu 1990a: 56). Differently, the determining effects of social relations slip—are forgotten or concealed—from conscious reflection in the body’s habits, rather than deposited in the mind’s unconscious.

This conceptualization of the term unconscious—one that emphasises a forgetting or concealing mediated through relations of power—emerges most clearly in Bourdieu’s discussion of the trap of the preconstructed object and the reflexive sociology he develops as a means for overcoming this trap (Bourdieu 1990a, Chapters 1 and 2; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, Chapter 1). As outlined in Chapter 4, Bourdieu’s reflexive sociology involves a “systematic exploration of the ‘unthought categories of thought’ which delimit the thinkable and predetermine the thought” (Bourdieu 1982 cited in Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 40). By the “unthought categories of thought”, Bourdieu is speaking about a “collective scientific unconscious embedded in theories, problems, and (especially national) categories of scholarly judgement” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 40). These taken for granted, unproblematized—the “unthought”, the forgotten, the concealed—means and modes of categorizing are part of the mechanism by which

the preconstructed object becomes the object of analysis. By engaging in the reflexive sociology Bourdieu calls for, where the researcher objectifies his own research practice, the researcher can begin to sidestep the collective scientific unconscious by constructing an object of analysis that is not an artefact of the social conditions of its own production:

I would argue that the collective unconsciousness of intellectuals is the specific form taken by the complicity of intellectuals with the dominant sociopolitical forces. I believe that the blindness of intellectuals to the social forces that rule the intellectual field, and therefore their practices, is what explains how, collectively, often under quite radical airs, the intelligentsia contributes to the perpetuation of the dominant forces.  
(Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 191)

That Bourdieu refers to a *collective* scientific unconscious in relation to “socio-political forces” suggests his use of the term unconscious has less to do with the psychic structures of the individual and more to do with the social relations of power that make some ideas more possible and other ideas more forgettable, more easily concealed. He sums up his use of the term unconscious in relation to research practice by noting it “is not the individual unconscious of the researcher but the epistemological unconscious of his [sic] discipline that must be unearthed” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 41).

When Bourdieu use the term unconscious in relation to individual subjects, he does so as a kind of shorthand for speaking about the forgetting that emerges through habitual actions—what, in one place, he refers to as an “abandonment”. As we engage with others through a field of social relations, we develop competencies, a feel for the game, that become part of who we are through their embodiment, competencies that, while operating without conscious thought, do not operate in or through the unconscious. Recall that for Bourdieu, subjects make decisions and engage with others “‘on the spot’, ‘in the twinkling of an eye’, ‘in the heat of the moment’, that is, in conditions which exclude distance, perspective, detachment, and reflection” (Bourdieu 1990a: 81). Thus, when Bourdieu writes, “At bottom, determinisms operate to their full only by the help of unconsciousness, with the complicity of the unconscious” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 136, emphasis added) he is not arguing that the habitus operates in or through any unconscious structures of the psyche, but rather operates, pre-reflectively, without conscious consideration—in the twinkling of an eye “For determinism to exert itself unchecked, *dispositions must be abandoned to their free play*. This means that agents

become something like ‘subjects’ only to the extent that they consciously master the *relation they entertain with their dispositions*. They can deliberately let them ‘act’ or they can on the contrary inhibit them by virtue of consciousness” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 136, emphasis added). Here, practice is determined not through the effects of an unconscious, but of dispositions—social relations embodied as habitus—that are forgotten or concealed.

Importantly, subjects can become aware of the relationship between habitus and field—they can “master the relation they entertain with their dispositions”—through which they live. Thus, the social process of forgetting historical actions—dispositions that are “abandoned to their free play”—can be reversed. This reversal has little to do, however, with the exploration of psychic structures embedded somewhere in the subject’s mind. Indeed, this reversal—a kind of remembering or finding—emerges through a sociological analysis of the social conditions that produce particular practices embodied as habitus. It is through this socio-analysis of socially mediated forgetting—of “the social conditions in which the habitus [...] was constituted”—that makes “possible the historical emergence of something like a rational subject via a reflexive application of social-scientific knowledge (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 49). Significantly, in speaking about the libratory possibilities of sociological analyses, Bourdieu sharpens the distinction between his use of a non-psychic conceptualization of the unconscious and a more conventional understanding of the unconscious as a psychic structure. “Socio-analysis may be seen as a collective counterpart to psycho-analysis; just as the logotherapy of the latter may free us from the individual unconscious that drives or constricts our practices, the former can help us unearth the social unconscious embedded into institutions as well as lodged deep inside us” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 49). Here, Bourdieu renders a therapeutic or libratory intervention with “individual unconscious drives” in terms that are distinct from a “social unconscious”.

In light of this commitment to think about habitus as that which is pre-reflective, as that which is not situated in the mind or consciousness, the following quote from *Distinction* is somewhat puzzling:

Thus, through the differentiated and differentiating conditions associated with the different conditions of existence [...] through all the hierarchies and classifications inscribed in objects, in institutions or simply in

language, and through all the judgements, verdicts, gradings and warnings imposed by the institutions specially designed for this purpose [...] or constantly arising from the meeting and interactions of everyday life, the social order is progressively inscribed in people's *minds*. (Bourdieu 1984: 471, emphasis added)

The puzzle emerges as Bourdieu summarizes: the suggestion that “the social order is progressively inscribed in people's *minds*” threatens to undermine or weaken any argument that the habitus is non-cognitive, operating below the threshold of consciousness. Why invoke the notion “mind”—a language of consciousness—if it “ignores the dialectic of social structures and structured, structuring dispositions through which schemes of thought are formed and transformed” (Bourdieu 1990a: 41)? Why fall into a language of consciousness if practice is better accounted for by attending to the way social relations are deposited in the body as habitus? Bourdieu's analytical legacy is, of course, enormous, and to point to one quote is hardly enough evidence to suggest that he traffics in contradictions. At the very least, however, his use of a language of consciousness—a slip into consciousness, if it can be called that—does leave room for a question or two. It is interesting that this slip into an analytical language Bourdieu struggles hard to resist appears not only in *Distinction* (1984)—what might be safely regarded as one of his most widely read texts—but also appears nearly fifteen years later in *Masculine Domination* (2001)—one of his most recent analyses. Taken together, these slippages offer enough room to raise some questions about the way Bourdieu conceptualizes and—more importantly—*applies* the notion of habitus to think about practice and identification. I take it as a subtle indication that using the notion habitus, as an explanatory concept to bring the body to the foreground in an account of practice is—at least—particularly challenging.

This suggestion becomes more tenable as one reads Bourdieu's application of habitus and symbolic violence in *Masculine Domination* (2001). What we can witness are at least two difficulties or puzzles in speaking about bodily experience and its role in shaping practice. On the one hand, as Bourdieu accounts for practice and identification, the habitus—as that which is supposed to be *below* the threshold of consciousness—in fact begins to manifest itself *above* the threshold of consciousness. On the other hand, we find the habitus—as that which is supposed to be *of* the body—positioned *outside* the body. Thus, as Bourdieu (2001) uses the body in his explanations—as a thing to be



understood or as a thing through which to understand practice—his analysis traffics in terms that lie closer to cognitive processes of interpretation than bodily experiences. In short, as Bourdieu applies the notion of habitus in his analyses, he does so by drawing on a language of consciousness: either the mind is activated to explain practice or the body is framed as a symbol to be understood by a consciousness.

For example, Bourdieu argues that we cannot think about our bodies as an imaginary thing, as the term “body image” suggests, because “such a model forgets that the whole social structure is present at the heart of the interaction, in the form of schemes of perception and appreciation *inscribed in the bodies* of the interacting agents” (Bourdieu 2001: 64, emphasis added). Thus, the morphology of the body or bodily hexis—its height, shape, and weight—is an effect of the social conditions of its production. Here, we can imagine the social organization in which a body is situated, constructing the subject’s bodily disposition—his or her habitus—through, for example, working conditions (sedentary or manual labour producing particular kinds of bodies over the course of a life time or the course of generations; particular dietary “choices”, linked to class opportunities or geography, leading to the production of particular kinds of bodies).

It is, however, after this that Bourdieu moves away from an analysis of practice based on the habitus that operates “below the threshold of consciousness” toward a more cognitive or reflective conceptualization of habitus. He writes “This bodily hexis...is assumed to express the ‘deep being’, the true ‘nature’ of the ‘person’, in accordance with the postulate of the correspondence between the ‘physical’ and the ‘moral’” (Bourdieu 2001: 64). While as an analyst, I disagree with neither the suggestion that body hexis/habitus is a product of the body’s social organization nor with the argument that subjects attribute meanings to bodies, this expression on the part of Bourdieu says nothing about how practice is an effect of a *pre-reflective* scheme of perception and appreciation. Here the subject is engaged in some sort of interpretive gesture, some sort of conscious reflection or assessment of the body in front of him or her.

The role of this interpretive energy in a conscious or cognitive process is more strongly articulated a few sentences later:

Thus, the gaze is not a simple universal and abstract power to objectify [...] it is a symbolic power whose efficacy depends on the relative position of the perceiver and the perceived and on the degree to which the schemes of perception and appreciation that are brought into play are *known* and *recognized* by the person to which they are applied. (Bourdieu 2001: 65, emphasis added)

Here the “schemas of perception”—the habitus—operate at a level somewhat *above* the threshold of consciousness—they “are brought into play”, they “are known and recognized”. A similar puzzle emerges when Bourdieu argues that the symbolic violence experienced by those who are dominated takes the form of

bodily emotions [...]. These emotions are all the more powerful when they are betrayed in visible manifestation such as blushing, stuttering, clumsiness, trembling, anger or impotent rage, so many ways of submitting, even despite oneself and ‘against the grain’, to the dominant judgement, sometimes in internal conflict and division of self, of experiencing the insidious complicity that *a body slipping from the control of consciousness and will maintains with the censures inherent in the social structures*. (Bourdieu 2001: 38. emphasis added)

Recall for Bourdieu “the concept of the habitus aims to *transcend*” “the usual antimonies [...] of [...] consciousness and unconscious” (1990a: 55). The habitus represents a means of speaking about practice without reference to a language of consciousness—a mode of analysis that does not rely on the mind or reflection. In light of a desire to avoid a “language of consciousness”, it is difficult to understand how the habitus—as a scheme of perceptions and appreciations operating pre-reflectively—is able to slip from “the control of consciousness and will.” If the concept of the habitus represents a means for speaking in something *other* than a language of consciousness, as a means of transcending the notions of conscious and unconsciousness, then why is the notion consciousness invoked at all?

Moreover, given Bourdieu’s conceptualization of the habitus as a set of embodied social relations manifested as schemes of perception and appreciation, one might safely assume that the habitus is, in some sense, *of* the body. If this is not the case, then why consider or use the notion “embodiment” in the first place? Yet, in the application of the habitus in his account of masculine domination, we find the habitus occupying places that are not *of* the body: “These schemes, in which a group embeds its fundamental structures, are interposed from the outset *between every agent and his or her body*,”

(Bourdieu 2001: 63, emphasis added). Here, in his application of the notion habitus, schemes of perception are no longer *of* the body—but rather exist “between every agent and his or her body”. How is that which is *of* the body as well exists or operates outside the body?

In raising these concerns, I do not disagree with Bourdieu’s argument about the links between habitus, symbolic violence, and practice. When Bourdieu argues that the paradox of masculine domination “is inscribed in the whole social order and operates in the obscurity of bodies” I am quite able to believe and accept his argument (Bourdieu 2001: 81). I believe the body and bodily experience play significant roles in identification and practice. Rather, I am puzzled with his *application* of this concept, an application that does not operate “below the threshold of consciousness” and one that does not seem to be *of* the body. In Bourdieu’s application of the notion habitus, embodied dispositions are pulled from the “obscurity of bodies” into the knowing consciousness that exists “between every agent and his or her body” (Bourdieu 2001: 63; 81). The puzzle I see here is this: as Bourdieu *theorizes* the origin of the practice, he does so in terms of embodiment—the habitus is the embodiment of social organization operating below the threshold of consciousness and, as something embodied, exists in, or at the very least, is *of* the body. When he engages in an *analysis* of masculine domination with the aid of the notion habitus, his focus moves, however, from something embodied, below the threshold of consciousness, to something that exists somewhere other than of the body, operating above the threshold of consciousness.

Indeed, in the second chapter of *Masculine Domination* (2001), Bourdieu moves farther away from the body as the site of dispositions when he uses the work of Virginia Woolf as a means of unpacking the paradoxes of masculine domination. Here, Bourdieu illustrates, quite clearly, the double paradox of masculine domination—the paradox of the doxa and the fragility of masculinity. While his argument is compelling, it is unclear, however, how the body figures into an experience based on the analysis of *textual* representations. When the body is introduced, it is as an object to be interpreted in light of a set of schemes of perception and appreciation. Thus, the body is a problem of meaning and in the end we are doubly removed from the body and bodily experience: we are asked to reflect on the body as a symbol within a literary context, in a context where

bodies are profoundly un-fleshed. Thus, on a closer reading of Bourdieu's *application* of the notion of habitus, it is neither clear how something he argues that functions below the threshold of consciousness can be involved in cognitive processes nor is it clear how something that he argues is embodied can exist or operate between the agent and his or her body. In short, in the application of the notion habitus, Bourdieu flirts with a language of consciousness, producing an account of practice that is neither pre-reflective nor *of* the body. This account flies in the face of his development of the notion of the habitus as a means of moving through a social physics on the one hand and an interpretive phenomenology on the other hand. Indeed the specificity—the analytical magic—of Bourdieu's conceptualization of the habitus lies in the way he highlights embodiment and the body as a means of moving through the poles of agency and structure in his account of practice and accounting for the intrinsically double nature of social reality. Why use the habitus as an analytical tool if the account produced uses a language of consciousness and positions habitus outside the body? The effect of this slippage is important in light of Bourdieu's goals—the analyst remains wedded to an interpretive phenomenology (which invokes a language of consciousness) and/or a social physics (which assumes the presence of social determinates residing outside the subject and his or her body).

### **Body as Gap, Bridge, and Blind Spot**

In raising these concerns, my intention is not to call for the wholesale rejection of either Butler or Bourdieu's theorizing. The work of both thinkers is, and will likely continue to be, productive in many regards. Rather by raising these questions in relation to an object of analysis that seems to be so much about the body and bodily experience I merely wish to deepen the analytical possibilities created by Butler and Bourdieu. The means to this emerge if we underline some of the assumptions shared by both thinkers. Both are arguing, in different ways, for a means of thinking about practice and identification that does not rely on agency, structure, or some combination of the two, but turns, rather, to the body and bodily experience. For Butler, the performative, as a "surface politics of the body", requires the body's presence in order for the production and regulation of identification and practice to emerge (Butler 1990: 135). Bourdieu accounts for practice and identification through the interaction of embodied dispositions

(habitus) and fields. Thus, fundamentally, Butler and Bourdieu do not disagree on *where* effective practice or identification emerges or where analysis should begin.

As outlined above, however, these accounts of practice lead to puzzles. In Butler's analysis, a body that exceeds discourse circulates through her commentary, one that disorients or expropriates "the discursive means of its own production" (Butler 1997: 159). In Bourdieu's analysis, on the other hand, the habitus, as the non-reflective generative principal of practice and identification, engages in conscious reflection and floats—disembodied?—between the subject and his or her body. With Butler, there is an inability to contain the body and bodily experience within language or discourse; with Bourdieu there is an inability to talk about the body and bodily experience in terms that are about or *of* the body. Language fails to capture the ineffability of the body and bodily experience. In the end, neither Butler nor Bourdieu are able to think about practice and identification in a consistently *bodily* manner.

The source of these puzzles lies less in the development of their analytical concepts as it does with the role each thinker gives the body in their analysis. Both begin with the assumption that there is a gap between structure and agency. "Given such a theoretical beginning the only possibility is to build a bridge between agency and social structure" (Rawls 1987: 139). Both Butler and Bourdieu use the body—as either the surface upon which discursive practices do their inscribing magic or as the incorporation of the field of social relations as habitus—as this bridge. It is this starting point—and not so much how the body is conceptualized on the way to an account of identity and practice—that creates puzzles. As each thinker tries to account for practice and identification, they look to the intersection of agency and structure in/on the body—the body is merely a tool to cross the gap. The body does not, in fact, have a role to play—except as something over which the effects of structure and agency can be felt. By treating the body as a bridge, each thinker is affected by a kind of myopia or blindness in terms of how the body may be used analytically. Slipping from view is the possibility of seeing the body *qua* body as a kind of actor, as a motivational or generative force in explaining practice and identification. I believe this is what Crossley is getting at when he writes—of the habitus—that there is:

something more to agency than the concept of habit can fully capture; a creative and generative dynamic which makes and modifies habits [...]. [P]eriodically actions and interactions give rise to new cultural forms and repertoires, often to the surprise of their creator, such that field and habitus 'move on' [...]. Without a more elaborate conception of the agent whose actions generate habits, it is impossible for [Bourdieu] to explain how habits are generated, modified or indeed fitted to the exigencies of material life circumstances. (Crossley 2001b: 116)

Actualizing a notion of the body as a kind of actor as part of an analytical strategy—the body as a generative force distinct from agency and structure—requires a slightly different starting point. If we *begin* with the idea that the body informs the social world *and* is informed by that social world, the salient question is no longer: How do agency and structure, the individual and society, micro and macro interact or come together to produce practice and identification? Rather, the questions that emerge are: What are the structuring powers of the socially influenced body? How are our emotional modes of being implicated in shaping the social system? Here, bodily experience—regardless of its conceptualization—is neither an effect of will nor an effect of structure—social or natural. In these terms an adequate account of practice and identification would need to begin with the notion that practice and identification are partial effects of the body's will—a will that is distinct from agency or structure. This is not to suggest that power is not part and parcel of practice and identification. It is rather sketch out a different conceptual starting place. Here power relations and the body/bodily experiences represent two aspects of the same process—where bodily experiences inform social relations of power and social relations of power inform bodily experience—implicated in the genesis of practice and identification. At this conceptual starting point there is no gap to bridge.

In the following section, I return, one last time, to the voices of circuit attendees to illustrate these points by touching on one attendee's account of sexual practice. Doing so has two analytical effects. On the one hand, it becomes apparent how the intersection of Butler and Bourdieu—the intersection of the heterosexual economy of desire and the field of power—is particularly productive in accounting for practice, identification, and the perpetuation of a larger heteronormative order. On the other hand, it also becomes apparent how their starting point—body as bridge—occludes understanding how the

body might be a social actor in and of itself, how the body and bodily experience might be a motivational force in and of itself.

### **“No, it was more of a click”**

The link between the circuit experience, the body, practice, identification, and the perpetuation of the heterosexual economy of desire is captured succinctly in the imagery and iconography of the go-go dancer:

If you want to get a sexual vibe going, have hot muscle-boy dancers grinding really wild on the boxes to hard music. It sends a vibe through the crowd.<sup>14</sup>

In the image of the *hot muscle-boy dancers* is crystallized the normative expectations of the heterosexual economy of desire. Indeed, given the analysis in Chapter 6, the *hot muscle-boy dancer* who approximates *the look* replicates the heterosexual economy of desire. Condensed in this quote are the mechanics of the circuit made visible through the notions of the field of power and the heterosexual economy of desire. *Hot muscle-boy dancers grinding really wild on the boxes* are not merely images or ideas, but images that send a *sexual vibe through the crowd*. The image of the *hot muscle-boy* is not simply understood; it enters the body in a physical way, as a *vibe that moves through the crowd*. In this process, symbols and meaning become the subject through practice and identification; the larger normative order is replicated through the body and bodily experience.

This movement of symbol and meaning as a *sexual vibe* that moves through the body into practice and identification is manifested quite clearly in Trent’s reflections on a sexual experience he had while at a circuit event:

Later, I asked him about the sex he had on the dance floor—wondering what went through his head. What was he thinking about it? Was he thinking about anything? “No it was more of a click. I just did it.” I pressed a bit more: You didn’t think about it, about everything around you? How did it happen if you weren’t thinking about it? “Well, this is what it means to be gay, I was just being gay, and I just did it, and no one was watching.” I pointed out that many were watching. He was genuinely surprised (how, I can’t imagine; how do you end up thinking that no one is watching when you are literally shoulder to shoulder with a dozen other

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<sup>14</sup> [www.yahogroups.com/circuitpartyinsantity](http://www.yahogroups.com/circuitpartyinsantity), December 15, 2000

men?). I asked him to elaborate on what he meant by “just being gay” and he brought up an experience he had in a really crowded bar at a big street party. He was surrounded by a crush of guys, standing room only, and ended up having sex with this guy by the pool table. So, was it about recognition? “Oh sure, we got lots of attention.” I pushed with a different question: Was it about being and doing something you always wanted to do or knew about, a way of finally being gay? “Oh totally. It was just about being gay and it seemed like the place to do it. I was finally comfortable with the whole gay thing. It was a sort of hey-look-at-me thing. Totally. That was totally it. I was finally comfortable and had a new coming out.” (Fieldnotes 1999, Trent)

There are several important threads here. At one level, Trent’s circuit experience involves a becoming—through practice—of a particular kind of sexual and gendered subject: *Well, this is what it means to be gay, I was just being gay, and I just did it.* At a second level, this identity practice is also a bodily practice—while his identification is linked to reflection on and with whom he interacts, it is also, fundamentally, an effect of sexual bodily practices. At a third level not only is this consideration of identity linked to a bodily practice, but it is exercised below the threshold of consciousness. Caught up in the exercise of dancing and the circuit experience, Trent’s cognitive capacities are, in many senses, secondary, where practice and identification are *of the body*, unhinged from reflection—where things are *more of a click*.

The link between the bodily aspect of Trent’s identity practice and the heterosexual economy of desire is something Barry’s analysis, from Chapter 6, helps unpack. In his discussion of gay men’s practice—as the bodily practices of sex—and in his analysis of this practice in terms of a broader heteronormative set of constraints, Barry spoke of being *on the prowl and looking for the next thing all the time*, arguing *I don’t think that will change until the rest of the world tolerates us. I think once we can come out when we are kids and not have to worry about anything—then we’ll end up not being so focused on sex.* In this light, the liberation and excitement embedded in Trent’s account—the sense of finally feeling comfortable—is a libratory expression of a self that makes sense only in relation to what is available in light of a larger heterosexual economy of desire. The available terms are, of course, those that problematize same sex desire. Thus, as Trent engages in sexual practice and makes his identification—*this is what it means to be gay, I was just being gay*—I am also drawn to Brian’s assessment about the importance of the circuit, as a place that is *about community and identity for*



*sure—like the tubs and clubs are about that—but at circuit events, it's also about flaunting the body.* Through a bodily identity practice—a *flaunting of the body*—Trent's sense of self emerges as an effect of a world that does not tolerate him.

This practice of identification is necessarily implicated in the reproduction of the social order of which circuit experience is an expression or elongation. Thus, I place a bit more pressure on Trent's experiences and suggest *just being gay* is also about doing the *sexual vibe* stomped out by the *hot muscle-boy dancers on boxes*—images which rest on and draw from a normative order of what is a desirable configuration of the body and identity. As something that just makes sense, Trent's *click* is an identity practice that accepts the larger normative order of the circuit. This is a form of symbolic violence, where the subject—in this case, Trent—lives with and accepts a particular sexual order exemplified by the *hot muscle-boy dancers*. The effect is the reproduction of the doxa, of the heterosexual economy of desire. The order of the circuit is produced by indirect mechanisms, by an investment and interest in an experience that simply makes sense—where things are *more of a click* than they are an act of conscious intent or external constraint. Part of the replication of the doxa rests on the fact that Trent buys into this order. “We have an investment in the game, *illusio*: players are taken in by the game, they oppose one another, sometimes with ferocity, only to the extent that they concur in their belief in the game and its stakes; they grant these a recognition that escapes questioning” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 98). With *a click*, Trent grants the logic of the heterosexual economy of desire a “recognition that escapes questioning.” Differently, the heterosexual economy of desire—embodied in the *hot muscle-boy dancers grinding really wild on the boxes*—comes to inform identity and practice in a bodily manner, lived as a bodily non-reflective *click*. Here, the meanings of the circuit, as schemes of perception and appreciation—this is *what it means to be gay*—operating below the threshold of consciousness function to support and replicate the larger normative order of which they are an embodied expression.

In light of this framework, Trent's account reveals the relationship between schemes of perception and appreciation inculcated in the subject, practice, and identification. There is also an aspect to Trent's reflections that are not picked up by this framework—an aspect that is more bodily in its orientation and organization, something

much fleshier in its experience. Not only is *being gay* about the bodily practices of sex on a dance floor, a bodily practice Trent “knew” pre-reflectively, but it is also based on the social recognition afforded by others—*a-hey-look-at-me-thing*—constitutive of one’s self-understanding. *I was finally comfortable and had a new coming out*. In short, Trent’s bodily practices of identification and sense of knowing—*a click*—allow for social recognition on the basis of the embodiment of symbolic classifications that are the circuit. Thus not only is his identification and practice associated with the circuit constructed through the regulation of the heterosexual economy of desire, it is also constructed through social recognition. In *Masculine Domination*, Bourdieu (2001) nudges this idea when he closes Chapter 1 by writing “Manliness, it can be seen, is an eminently *relational* notion, constructed in front of and for other men and against femininity, in a kind of *fear* of the female, firstly in oneself” (p. 53, emphasis in the original). In subsequent chapters, however, Bourdieu builds his argument around the relational construction of the gender order, and does not elaborate on this notion that masculine identification is “constructed in front of and for other men”.

By thinking about agency and structure in terms of a gap, and reading the body as a bridge to cross this gap, neither Butler nor Bourdieu are able to use this notion of social recognition as an aspect of identification and practice. In failing to do so both lose an opportunity to think about the body as a source of motivation and change. The process of social recognition is a profoundly bodily act—a social moment or process that has the body, as an agentic force in its own right, at the centre of its mechanics and structure. Understanding the bodily nature of social recognition might be most productively understood in terms of Goffman’s “interaction order”—that part of social life that is “concerned with corporal co-presence that is relatively autonomous from, but also consequential for, social structure and social action” (Shilling 1997b: 749). For Goffman, the interaction order—that domain of social life where face-to-face interactions take place—is characterized by four qualities. First, it is a constituent part of people’s self. Without this order, there could be no self, no mechanism or space through which people understand who they are. Second, it is an order that makes demands on the larger social order. The structure of a particular interaction order—how subjects relate to each other—continues often in spite of institutional constraints. Third, the interaction order produces

sets of meanings that are irreducible to either individual idiosyncrasies or larger ideological systems. Last, this order makes moral—and not structurally coercive—demands on people. People need the interaction order to develop a stable sense of self—but they are not forced to act in a particular way.

Rather than thinking about identification and practice in terms of agency and/or social structure, Shilling (1997b) draws on Goffman's notion of an interaction order to advocate beginning "with those settings, commitments, and understandings, which allows agents and social structures to have a social presence in the first place," (Rawls 1987: 139). For Goffman, the self is dependent on social interaction for its existence—without social interaction there could be no self. This dependence of the self on interaction "places constraints on the interaction order, its forms, and the actions of participation. Regardless of class, organisational roles, or formal institutional structures there are obligations imposed on interactants by the needs of self via the interaction order which cannot be foregone" (Rawls 1987: 139). I introduce Goffman's notion of the interaction order not to adopt his ideas or suggestions, but as a means to think about an embodied understanding of practice and identification. While Butler and Bourdieu have given us a sense of how the subject might emerge—as an effect of power on the body or as the intersection of field and habitus—neither is able to offer a bodily account for what motivates practice and identification. Goffman's interaction order, however, is premised on the *need* for social corporeal co-presence. Humans need human contact—indeed social co-presence is that which makes us human. This suggests that understanding and theorizing practice and identification necessarily involves a consideration of the specifically bodily state of need or desire.

It may be that which accounts for change and creativity is the desire for forms of interaction not currently present within a particular social field. Like Butler, I believe it is sensible to suggest that nothing exists before discourse or the social when thinking about identification and practice. What I do not think is productive, however, is the implication that Butler draws from this starting point: that practice and innovative change can be accounted for *only* in terms of the social and linguistic system already present. Similarly, Bourdieu's account of practice and action is also wedded to the status quo through the recursive relationship he articulates between habitus and field. An alternative to this, one

that is both sensitive to social conditions and bodily experience is to suggest that agency can be accounted for by something immanent within, but currently curtailed from being expressed in, that social field. To suggest, as I am, that innovative change and identification extends from a *lack* within a discursive system is conceptually very different from suggesting that practice emerges from something outside or beyond discourse. This is a distinction that I do not believe Butler or Bourdieu makes and as a result both are forced to account for practice and identification in terms of what is present rather than absent from, but not outside, a set of social or linguistic practices.

### **Identification, Practice, and the Desire for Recognition**

Following Honneth (1995) and Crossley (2001b) I frame this absence and associated need as a *desire for recognition*. We desire things or objects within particular social fields not due to any intrinsic value, but for the fact that those objects represent the desire of the other, for the fact that they represent the means whereby we are socially recognised:

The notion of a desire for recognition gives us an account of the motivational springs which might give rise to any number of contests for status, privilege and anything else which ultimately represents recognition. This [...] is precisely what fields are; structured spaces of contestation, which have emerged within societies to give expression to the desire and need for recognition. Moreover, because the stakes in each field are, in a sense, simply arbitrary tokens of recognition, it is relatively straightforward to comprehend how they emerge and are displaced through time or indeed, as Bourdieu says, how they are construed and renegotiated in the course of struggle itself. (Crossley 2001b: 102)

Understanding desire to be at the root of practice and identification has significant implications in light of the difficulties raised with Butler and Bourdieu. Instead of emerging from the always already failure of the performative inscription of ideals or from the interaction between habitus and a particular set of field relations, practice and identification are conceptualised as coming from desire. In *The Struggle for Recognition* Honneth (1995) illustrates the ways in which various forms of inter-subjective social recognition are crucial, indeed necessary, for the complete development of the human subject. It is around this need—this desire for recognition—that I begin to build a bodily account of identification and practice.

Honneth (1995) writes, “Inherent in our everyday use of language is a sense that human integrity owes its existence, at a deep level, to [social] patterns of approval and recognition” (p. 131). To be and become human, we must be enmeshed in social relations that afford us social recognition from others—there exists a “constitutional dependence of humans on the experience of recognition” (Honneth 1995: 136). He outlines three forms of social recognition which contribute to the full development of the subject: the particular recognition accorded to the subject in love relations (as exemplified by the mother-infant relationship); the universal recognition accorded to the subject through legislation, rights, and obligations; and the particular recognition where subjects are recognised for their unique capacity to contribute to a shared value horizon. Each of these patterns of recognition necessarily leads to particular “practical relations-to-self” on the part of the subject. These practical relations-to-self—the ground upon which the subject approaches the world—are necessary for full human actualisation. Importantly, each of these forms of recognition are not givens within a social field. Rather their presence is premised on struggle. As humans we struggle for recognition and thus for our status as humans. It is this struggle that accounts for identification and practice.

While social recognition creates and supports the subject’s sense of self and actualises the potential to be human, Honneth identifies disrespect as that which undermines a subject’s self-esteem, self-respect, and self-confidence. The concept of disrespect functions to illustrate the ways a refusal of recognition can be understood as both dangerous and immoral. “Because the normative self-image of each and every individual human being [...] is dependent on the possibility of being continually backed up by others, the experience of being disrespected carries with it the danger of an injury that can bring the identity of the person as a whole to the point of collapse (Honneth 1995: 131). Honneth suggests that we can distinguish between various forms of disrespect.

Physical abuse represents a type of disrespect that does “lasting damage to one’s basic confidence (learned through love) that one can autonomously co-ordinate one’s own body” (Honneth 1995: 132). A second form of disrespect involves the structural or systematic exclusion of the subject from “the possession of certain rights within a society” (Honneth 1995: 133). Here the subject is denied the space to be recognised as

capable of making decisions about the self and others—a capacity given to others. Honneth (1995) argues “this type of disrespect typically brings with it a loss of self-respect, of the ability to relate to oneself as a legally equal interaction partner with all fellow humans” (p. 134). With reference to those forms of disrespect that shatter self-esteem Honneth writes,

to downgrade individual forms of life and manners of belief as inferior or deficient [...] robs the subjects in question of every opportunity to attribute social value to their own abilities [such] that they cannot relate to their mode of life as something of positive significance within their community[ ...]. [T]his social devaluation typically brings with it a loss of personal self-esteem, of the opportunity to regard themselves as beings whose traits and abilities are esteemed. (P. 134)

This is a critical point for Honneth who is interested in constructing a way of thinking about ethical behaviour and social models freed from the anti-foundationalism associated with much current postmodern scholarship. Honneth is working to create a sensible and flexible foundational framework for thinking about the social world. Simply put, morally indefensible behaviour is disrespectful behaviour insofar as it threatens the integrity of the subject’s humanness.

### **Conclusion: The Desire for Recognition and the Body**

It is at this point that Honneth’s arguments become particularly important for my own concerns. Honneth notes that the subjective experiences of disrespect are often articulated in terms that make reference to assaults on the human body—we speak of psychological death, of social death, of mortification, of scars, of social injury and being damaged and traumatised by disrespectful actions. These metaphorical allusions to physical suffering and death articulate the idea that various forms of disregard for the psychological integrity of humans play the same negative role that organic infections take on in the context of the reproduction of the body. The experience of being socially denigrated or humiliated endangers the identity of human beings, just as infection with a disease endangers their physical life. Based on this observation, Honneth argues that it becomes possible to identify a group of symptoms—emotional responses—that can be used as indices of disrespect. “The hypothesis here is that what corresponds to physical indications [...] are the sort of negative emotional reactions expressed in feelings of

social shame” (Honneth 1995: 135). What this means is that a refusal of recognition brings about a negative emotional reaction—what Honneth identifies as social shame—which reveals to the subject and others that recognition is being withheld.

Shame consists in a lowering of one’s feeling of self-worth as a consequence of having one’s actions rejected. For Honneth, this emotional reaction of shame is key to the issue of identification and practice: “the negative emotional reactions accompanying the experience of disrespect could represent precisely the affective motivational basis in which the struggled-for recognition is anchored” (Honneth 1995: 135). Here, identification and practice is grounded in the absence of social recognition—an absence which is marked by the experience of shame. In short, these negative affective experiences are a function of whether or not we succeed or fail in fulfilling the actions we intend to accomplish. We live within a social universe where certain actions are understood and experienced as rightfully ours to make. If an action fails “as a result of unanticipated obstructions, this leads to ‘technical’ disruptions [...]. [S]hould actions guided by norms taken to be valid be repelled by situations because the norms taken to be valid are violated, this leads to ‘moral’ conflicts in the social lifeworld” (Honneth 1995: 137). In cases like this, the subject is disappointed by a failure in another’s fulfilment of normative expectations and comes to understand that one’s sense of self is “constitutively dependent on the recognition of others” (Honneth 1995: 138). Being disrespected becomes a motivational factor in a struggle for recognition and hence practice and identification. “For it is only by regaining the possibility of active conduct that individuals can dispel the state of emotional tension into which they are forced as a result of humiliation” (Honneth 1995: 138).

What I take from Honneth is the central position given to bodily experiences in his account of identification and practice. Both Butler and Bourdieu attempt to outline how identification and practice are effects of the body’s relation to power, but this intersection between the body and power, or between the body and the social field is incoherent. While Butler’s heterosexual economy of desire allows us a way of configuring the field of power in ways that are sensitive to gender and desire, and Bourdieu offers us a way of thinking about how this heterosexual economy of desire might operate, Butler’s account founders on bodies buried in the underbrush of discourse

and Bourdieu's application of the habitus produces an account of the body that thinks and acts in a cognitive manner. Neither Butler nor Bourdieu's account gives us a clear sense of the body's *bodily* role in identification and practice.

Honneth's notion of the struggle for recognition does just this, creating an account of identification and practice that highlights the role of bodily processes and experiences—recognition and its refusal are fundamentally somatic social processes. Recognition is experienced and its refusal expressed in and through the fibres of our muscles and organs—as a quickened pulse, as the flush of humiliation, as a churning stomach, as weeping. At the same time, recognition and its refusal are profoundly social experiences articulated through social relations of power grounded in history. Recognition is the intersection of the somatic and the social, and it is here that Honneth finds not only the genesis of the agent—we cannot be human without recognition—but also the motivation of identification and practice. “For each of the negative emotional reactions that accompany the experience of having one's claims to recognition disregarded holds out the possibility that the injustice done to one will cognitively disclose itself and become a motive for political resistance” (138).

This approach helps render Trent's account in a different light. Trent's bodily practice—*sex he had on the dance floor*—is intimately connected to his identification—*I just did it: this is what it means to be gay*. As a kind of identity practice, Trent's actions are produced in relation to a world that does not tolerate the bodily practices that Trent builds his sense of self around. Trent's identification—indeed every identification—manifests itself in relation to that which is (not) tolerated. *I think once we can come out when we are kids and not have to worry about anything—then we'll end up not being so focused on sex*. As the overarching conditions and meanings through which Trent is understood—and thus the only conditions through which he might understand himself—the heterosexual economy of desire produces an identification that remains *focused on sex*. As Trent's identity practices are effects of the denial embedded in this economy of desire—and implicated in the reproduction of this economy—it is in this denial that a bodily account of identification and practice rests. The genesis of Trent's identification and practice emerges from a desire for social recognition—a *hey-look-at-me thing*—articulated through a *flaunting of the body*, a practice-as-identification whose effects are



witnessed in the (de)formation of identity and community. Thus as much as Trent's practice is a liberatory moment—*I was finally comfortable*—constrained though it was to the terms of the heterosexual economy of desire, it is also a moment of identification and practice whose genesis lies in a bodily motivation.

Moreover, unlike Butler and Bourdieu, Honneth's account of identification and practice is able to grapple with the idea of innovative change. Recall that for Butler the necessary resources for identification and practice cannot emerge from outside the always already discursive system; identification and practice emerges from resignifications of what is already present. Recall also that for Bourdieu, identification and practice emerges through the interaction of the social relations of a particular social field and the subject's embodiment of those social structures as habitus. For Bourdieu, truly innovative change is likely to occur only in those situations where the subject enters a field completely new to his or her habituated way of living in the world. Both accounts engender a constrained and limited notion of identification and practice—each is committed, in different ways, to the status quo; neither is able to account for radical innovation. This inability emerges from how each thinker frames the relationship between agency and structure as one of radical difference. An account of identification and practice requires some mechanism to bridge this difference and link the information and possibilities within structure to agency to account for action. Both Butler and Bourdieu use the body as a bridging concept and in doing this, fail to think about the body in agentic terms. As a result, both thinkers are compelled to focus their analytical attentions on either structure and/or agency. The body, however, represents an important resource in this process of identification, a point for which Honneth's conceptualization of the struggle for recognition allows to be brought to the foreground.

Our bodily reactions to and need for recognition is enough of a resource to account for innovation and change to current social conditions. Bodily needs give us the capacity to look beyond what is already present. Our bodily need for social recognition is immanent within social interactions—we cannot be without social recognition—but the conditions that afford this recognition from others are not always or necessarily present. The desire and need for patterns of recognition not present within our social field, but needed and necessary for subjects to be human, accounts for forms of identification and

practice that are not limited to the resources present in the status quo or the always already discursive apparatus. Rather than begin with the assumption that the agent and structure are distinct, and must somehow meet or connect, Honneth begins with the assumption that bodily needs and experiences necessarily inform the social world *and* are informed by that social world. Here, there is no gap between the agent and social structure. For Honneth, identification and practice—as the struggle for recognition—is an embodied identification and practice, where social relations become the body and the socially formed body has the potential to inform social structure. Thus, through Honneth’s analysis, we are, I believe, able to account for “how the embodied actor is both partly shaped by society, yet also able to influence its future development” (Shilling 1997b: 747). Most importantly, an account organized in terms of a desire for recognition is an account of identification and practice that is both social and somatic in its organization. The desire for recognition is a bodily experience, one grounded in social relations that afford or refuse recognition. Identification and practice have their roots—their genesis to use Bourdieu’s word—in a socially organized bodily need, a need that is fundamentally about a need for coherence based on social recognition. It is in this way that the body—its ineffability, its facticity—becomes part and parcel of how we might conceptualize the subject

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# Appendix A Ethics Approval

## SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

OFFICE OF RESEARCH ETHICS



BURNABY, BRITISH COLUMBIA  
CANADA V5A 1S6  
Telephone: 604-291-3447  
FAX: 604-268-6785

September 22, 2003

Mr. Russell Westhaver  
Graduate Student  
Sociology and Anthropology  
Simon Fraser University

Dear Mr. Westhaver:

**Re: Party Boys: Identity, Community, and the Circuit**

The above-titled ethics application has been granted approval by the Simon Fraser Research Ethics Board, in accordance with Policy R 20.01, "Ethics Review of Research Involving Human Subjects".

Sincerely,

Dr. Hal Weinberg, Director  
Office of Research Ethics

# *Appendix B*

## *Subject's Informed Consent Forms*

### **Form 1: Statement of Research Procedure, Risk, and Benefit (Event Production Company X)**

My research project centres on the how the gay men who attend circuit parties understand themselves and those who participate and attend circuit parties. In particular, I am interested in the way these events come to inform attendee's senses of self and how these events come to shape patterns of community formation and change. This project is part of my doctoral thesis research.

As an employee of Event Production Company X, a company that organises a circuit event in Vancouver, your thoughts and conduct would be invaluable to my research interests. As a member of the organising team, you will not only have insights into these events, but are also in a position to shape these events. Both these insights and the decisions you make in directing the course of the event could represent information that would offer me a better understanding of how circuit parties operate.

I would like to invite you to participate in my research project. This would involve you allowing me to involve myself in your day-to-day working operations at the offices of Event Production Company X. While I will be working with you in the normal day-to-day procedures of Event Production Company X, I will also be observing the things you may say or things you may do while in the offices for the purposes of my research. Some of these observations may be recorded and used for research purposes. By research purposes, I mean that things you say or do may end up as data to be used in the writing of my doctoral thesis. This information may also be used for other academic research, publications in referred journals, teaching purposes, or academic and community speaking engagements. At no point will I reveal your identity to anyone outside the offices of Event Production Company X. To protect your identity, I will use pseudonyms

when referring to people, places, and events. To further ensure confidentiality, all notes or recordings stored on computer disk will remain protected by passwords known only to myself. Hardcopies of notes or recordings will remain either at my premises or my offices at Simon Fraser University, secured in locked cabinets.

There are no foreseeable risks to you or this office associated with your participation in my research project. My relationship to you and the office would be no different than the relationships you would have with any other new working member of Event Production Company X.

The risk or potential harm that might reasonably emerge from your participation in my research project is very small. My interactions and behaviours at Event Production Company X's office would not differ from those of any new member of the office and it is unlikely that my presence in the offices of Event Production Company X will place you at risk of mental or physical. It is conceivable, however, that non-employees could discover who is working for Mr. X through my research, bringing about the possibility of social harm. For some employees, this may present some difficulties insofar as the events organised by Mr. X and Event Production Company X are gay events and some employees may, understandably, not wish to be identified as working with or for a gay event producer. This risk is not only slight, but one that is mitigated by the fact that I will **not** be using information that could be used to identify employees in my research and writing.

There are, I believe, some far-reaching benefits to your participation in my research project. Your involvement in this project could enable a clearer understanding of how it is gay men, as a politically marginalised and socially stigmatised group, come together to form community. Understanding these dynamics of community formation could be beneficial in two ways:

1. On the one hand, understanding how a gay community comes together, how it understands itself, how it dissolves and how it changes would be invaluable for furthering for developing strategies aimed at ensuring the security and entrenchment of same-sex rights protections and political mobilisation on other issues germane to the lives of gay men.
2. On the other hand, understanding community formation—how community members interact with others, how they understand these interactions—would prove invaluable for the purposes of HIV/AIDS intervention and prevention strategies. While HIV/AIDS is not a disease that targets gay men or gay communities in particular, adequate prevention and intervention does require a solid understanding of how it is community members come together and why it is community members come together as they do.

If you have any other questions about the nature of this research project, please do not hesitate to contact me. I would be glad to address any concerns you may have.

## **From 2: Informed Consent by Subjects to Participate in a Research Project (Event Production Company X)**

The University and those conducting this project subscribe to the ethical conduct of research and to the protection at all times of the interests, comfort, and safety of subjects.

This form and the information it contains are given to you for your own protection and full understanding of the procedures. Your signature on this form will signify that you have received a document which describes the procedures, possible risks, and benefits of this research project, that you have received an adequate opportunity to consider the information in the document, and that you voluntarily agree to participate in the project.

Any information that is obtained during this study will be kept confidential to the full extent permitted by law. Knowledge of your identity is not required. You will not be required to write your name or any other identifying information on the research materials. Materials will be held in a secure location and will be destroyed after the completion of the study. The completion date for this study is set for December of 2002. However, it is possible that, as a result of legal action, the researcher may be required to divulge information obtained in the course of this research to a court or other legal body.

I **Mr X** agree to give **Russell Westhaver** permission to involve himself in the day-to-day office workings and operations of **Event Production Company X**. As the director of **Event Production Company X** I am aware that Russell Westhaver will conduct participant observation field research with **Event Production Company X**. In signing this form, I formerly approve Russell Westhaver's research at **Event Production Company X**, in accordance to Simon Fraser Ethics Policy R20.01 (6 g vi). I understand that observations he makes while with **EVENT PRODUCTION COMPANY X** will be recorded for research purposes. I understand research purposes to mean using these observations for the purposes of thesis research, public speaking engagements, academic conferences, and future publications.

I make this agreement under the following conditions:

- 1) Any notes or recordings Russell Westhaver might make while participating in the operations of **Event Production Company X**, with employees of **Event Production Company X**, or with myself will be kept confidential. I understand confidentiality to mean that the notes and recordings Russell Westhaver makes while with **Event Production Company X** will not be publicly linked to my employees, **Event Production Company X's** offices, or myself.
- 2) To ensure confidentiality, all notes or recordings stored on computer disk will remain protected by passwords known only to Russell Westhaver. Hardcopies of notes or recordings will remain at the premises of Russell Westhaver or his offices at Simon Fraser University, secured in locked cabinets. Russell Westhaver will also ensure that the identities of my employees, the offices of **Event Production Company X**, and myself will be protected through the use of pseudonyms when referring to persons, locations, and events that deal directly with **Event Production Company X**.
- 3) I may review drafts of research findings and conclusions that deal *directly* with the operation of **Event Production Company X** to ensure that the requirements of confidentiality are satisfactorily met. I agree to review and comment on drafts of relevant sections of Russell Westhaver's findings within six (6) weeks of having received this draft from Russell Westhaver. I agree that Russell Westhaver and I will negotiate any changes I request to ensure that requirements of academic integrity are met.

- 4) I agree that the purpose of this review is to negotiate with Russell Westhaver to ensure that finished research products meet requirements of *confidentiality*, as outlined in point 1 above.
- 5) That Russell Westhaver and I will inform employees **Event Production Company X** that Russell Westhaver's participation with **Event Production Company X** is part of his doctoral field research. Employees will be given the opportunity to accept or refuse participation, with no consequences for acceptance or refusal.
- 6) That the risks associated with Russell Westhaver's research are no greater than the risks of everyday life.
- 7) That I may ask for further clarification on what Russell Westhaver's research is about, how it is being conducted, and how it is being disseminated.
- 8) That I may register any complaint I might have about this researcher with:

Dr. Ellen Gee  
 Chair  
 Department of Sociology and Anthropology  
 Simon Fraser University  
 AQ 5054  
 8888 University Drive  
 Burnaby BC V5A 1S6  
 (604) 291-3146  
[Ellen\\_Gee@sfu.ca](mailto:Ellen_Gee@sfu.ca)

- 9) That I may withdraw my support of Russell Westhaver's participant observation at **Event Production Company X**, in part in or full, up to February 29, 2000.

SIGNATURE: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

WITNESS: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

ONCE SIGNED, A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM AND A STATEMENT OF RESEARCH PROCEDURE, RISK AND BENEFIT SHOULD BE PROVIDED TO THE SUBJECT.

**Form 3: Statement of Research Procedure, Risk, and Benefit (Informal Conversations)**

My research project centres on the how gay men who attend circuit parties understand themselves and those who participate and attend circuit parties. In particular, I am interested in the way these events come to inform attendee's sense of self and how these events come to shape patterns of community formation and change. This project is part of my doctoral thesis research.

On [Date] at [Location] I recall having a conversation with you [and Name of others involved in the conversation, if applicable] that centred on your experiences of, and thoughts about, circuit parties. As someone who has attended circuit parties, these experiences and thoughts would be an invaluable contribution to my research into the circuit experience.

I would like to invite you to participate in my research project. This would involve you giving me permission to use my recollection of the conversation we had on [Date] for research purposes. By research purposes, I mean to use my recording of the events that took place on [Date] at [Location] as data to be used in the writing of my doctoral thesis. This information may also be used for other academic research, publications in referred journals, teaching purposes, or academic and community speaking engagements. At no point will I reveal your identity to anyone. To protect your identity, I will ensure that these notes remain confidential such that my recorded observations will not be publicly linked to you. To do so, I will use pseudonyms when referring to you and this conversation. To further ensure confidentiality, all notes or recordings stored on computer disk will remain protected by passwords known only to myself. Hardcopies of notes or recordings will remain either at my premises or my offices at Simon Fraser University, secured in locked cabinets.

Attached is a copy of the written observations I made shortly following our discussion on [Date] at [Location]. Please feel free to add any thoughts or comments that you feel might be useful—corrections, elaborations, whatever you might like to add. I ask you to consider this recording carefully. If, for any reason, you feel that an anonymous version of this recording would cause you any discomfort please let me know and I will not use it as data. If you wish, you may at any time withdraw your consent, in which case I will not use my recordings as data.

Any risk or potential harm that might reasonably emerge from your participation in my research project is, I believe, very small. It is possible that in reading the final research product another individual may be able to identify you by virtue of them remembering having had a conversation with you on [Date] at [Location]. That this recognition might create harm is very unlikely given that this conversation has already taken place and is already part of your relationship with these/this conversational partner/s. Moreover, I will have asked all individuals involved in this conversation for their informed consent, so everyone involved will be aware of how and where my recorded observations will be used and placed. Only in those cases where all the individuals involved give me written consent will the recordings be used for my research.

There are, I believe, some far-reaching benefits to your participation in my research project. Your involvement in this project could enable a clearer understanding of how it is gay men, as a politically marginalised and socially stigmatised group, come together to form community. Understanding these dynamics of community formation could be beneficial in two ways:

1. On the one hand, understanding how a gay community comes together, how it understands itself, how it dissolves and how it changes would be invaluable for furthering for developing strategies aimed at ensuring the security and entrenchment of same-sex rights protections and political mobilisation on other issues germane to the lives of gay men.

On the other hand, understanding community formation—how community members interact with others, how they understand these interactions—would prove invaluable for the purposes of HIV/AIDS intervention and prevention strategies. While HIV/AIDS is not a disease that targets gay men or gay communities in particular, adequate prevention



and intervention does require a solid understanding of how it is community members come together and why it is community members come together as they do.

If you have any other questions about the nature of this research project, please do not hesitate to contact me. I would be glad to address any concerns you may have.

**Form 4: Statement of Research Procedure, Risk, and Benefit (In-depth Interviews)**

My research project centres on how gay men who attend circuit parties understand themselves and those who participate and attend circuit parties. In particular, I am interested in the way these events come to inform attendee's sense of self and how these events come to shape patterns of community formation and change. This project is part of my doctoral thesis research.

As someone who has attended circuit parties, I believe your experiences and comments on the circuit would be invaluable to my research project. I would like to invite you to participate in my research project. This would involve you giving me permission to sit down with you for an hour or so to talk about your experiences in and around circuit parties for research purposes. I am interested in what you think about the circuit, your opinions about what it means, and how you understand circuit parties. I would like to record this interview on audiocassettes and later transcribe these recordings into written format.

By research purposes, I mean to use the ideas, opinions, and experiences we discuss during the interview as data to be used in the writing of my doctoral thesis. This information may also be used for other academic research, publications in referred journals, teaching purposes, or academic and community speaking engagements. At no point will I reveal your identity to anyone. To protect your identity, I will ensure that these recordings and the written transcripts remain confidential such that they will not be publicly linked to you. To do so, I will use pseudonyms when referring to you and our conversation. To further ensure confidentiality, all notes or recordings stored on computer disk will remain protected by passwords known only to myself. Hardcopies of notes or recordings will remain either at my premises or my offices at Simon Fraser University, secured in locked cabinets. If you wish, you may withdraw your consent at any time, in which case I will not use the interview as data.

Any risk or potential harm that might reasonably emerge from your participation in my research project is, I believe, very small. It is possible that in reading the final research product another individual may be able to recognise your ideas and opinions by virtue of their prior knowledge of you. Even if this were to occur, there would be no way in which this recognition could be confirmed. I believe this potential will be mitigated by the fact that we will be speaking in terms of generalities and opinions, not specific actions, people or places. To further ensure your confidentiality, I will—if you like—give you a copy of the transcripts to edit or comment upon. If there are moments or points in the transcript that you feel others might be able to use to identify you, please inform me and I will refrain from using these sections.

There are, I believe, some far-reaching benefits to your participation in my research project. Your involvement in this project could enable a clearer understanding of a how it is gay men, as a politically marginalised and socially stigmatised group, come together to

form community. Understanding these dynamics of community formation could be beneficial in two ways:

1. On the one hand, understanding how a gay community comes together, how it understands itself, how it dissolves and how it changes would be invaluable for furthering for developing strategies aimed at ensuring the security and entrenchment of same-sex rights protections and political mobilisation on other issues germane to the lives of gay men.
2. On the other hand, understanding community formation—how community members interact with others, how they understand these interactions—would prove invaluable for the purposes of HIV/AIDS intervention and prevention strategies. While HIV/AIDS is not a disease that targets gay men or gay communities in particular, adequate prevention and intervention does require a solid understanding of how it is community members come together and why it is community members come together as they do.

If you have any other questions about the nature of this research project, please do not hesitate to contact me. I would be glad to address any concerns you may have.

**Form 5: Statement of Research Procedure, Risk, and Benefit (Newsgroups)**

My research project centres on how gay men who attend circuit parties understand themselves and those who participate and attend circuit parties. In particular, I am interested in the way these events come to inform attendee's sense of self and how these events come to shape patterns of community formation and change. This project is part of my doctoral thesis research.

As someone who has posted on the "X" newsgroup, and attended circuit parties, I believe your ideas and comments would be important for my project. I would like to invite you to participate in my research project. This would involve you giving me permission to use the information you posted on [Date]. By research purposes, I mean to use your posts in the writing of my doctoral thesis. This information may also be used for other academic research, publications in referred journals, teaching purposes, or academic and community speaking engagements. At no point will I reveal your identity to anyone. To protect your identity, I will ensure that postings will remain confidential such that they will not be publicly linked to you. To do so, I will use pseudonyms when referring to you and I will not indicate that the posting came from an internet newsgroup when discussing my research. To further ensure confidentiality, all notes or recordings stored on computer disk will remain protected by passwords known only to myself. Hardcopies of notes or recordings will remain either at my premises or my offices at Simon Fraser University, secured in locked cabinets.

Any risk or potential harm that might reasonably emerge from your participation in my research project is, I believe, very small. While I will not be identifying your post as a newsgroup posting (it is my intention to frame these postings as interview data) it is *possible* that in reading the final research product another person may recognise your posting by virtue of having previously read it on the newsgroup. It is also conceivable that this person could find the recognised post in CPI newsgroup archives. This does not, however, present any more risk than you might experience in using newsgroup normally. Only the location of the original post could be identified—something all newsgroup

members already have access to. Moreover, given that these posts are linked to you only through an anonymous email address they cannot be linked to you personally in any way. Thus, even if another person were to recognise your posts in my research writing, this person would be no closer to knowing who you are than if they had read the post in its original location.

There are, I believe, some far-reaching benefits to your participation in my research project. Your involvement in this project could enable a clearer understanding of how it is gay men, as a politically marginalised and socially stigmatised group, come together to form community. Understanding these dynamics of community formation could be beneficial in two ways:

1. On the one hand, understanding how a gay community comes together, how it understands itself, how it dissolves and how it changes would be invaluable for furthering strategies aimed at ensuring the security and entrenchment of same-sex rights protections and political mobilisation on other issues germane to the lives of gay men.
2. On the other hand, understanding community formation—how community members interact with others, how they understand these interactions—would prove invaluable for the purposes of HIV/AIDS intervention and prevention strategies. While HIV/AIDS is not a disease that targets gay men or gay communities in particular, adequate prevention and intervention does require a solid understanding of how it is community members come together and why it is community members come together as they do.

If you have any other questions about the nature of this research project, please do not hesitate to contact me. I would be glad to address any concerns you may have.

#### **For 6: Informed Consent by Subjects to Participate in a Research Project (Interview, Informal Conversation, Newsgroup)**

The University and those conducting this project subscribe to the ethical conduct of research and to the protection at all times of the interests, comfort, and safety of subjects. This form and the information it contains are given to you for your own protection and full understanding of the procedures. Your signature on this form will signify that you have received a document (see attached information sheet) which describes the procedures, possible risks, and benefits of this research project, that you have received an adequate opportunity to consider the information in the document, and that you voluntarily agree to participate in the project.

Any information that is obtained during this study will be kept confidential to the full extent permitted by law. Knowledge of your identity is not required. You will not be required to write your name or any other identifying information on the research materials. Materials will be held in a secure location and will be destroyed after the completion of the study. The completion date for this study is set for December of 2002. However, it is possible that, as a result of legal action, the researcher may be required to divulge information obtained in the course of this research to a court or other legal body.

Having been asked by Russell Westhaver of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology of Simon Fraser University to participate in a research project, I have read the procedures and recorded observations specified in the attached document.

I understand the procedures to be used in this research process and the personal risks to me in taking part.

I understand that I may withdraw my participation in this research project at any time, with no consequences, with the additional understanding that Russell Westhaver will not use any material from the interview for research purposes.

I also understand that I may register any complaint I might have about the research project with:

Dr. Ellen Gee  
Chair  
Department of Sociology and Anthropology  
Simon Fraser University  
AQ 5054  
8888 University Drive  
Burnaby BC V5A 1S6  
(604) 291-3146  
Ellen\_Gee@sfu.ca

I may obtain copies of the results of this study, upon its completion, by contacting Russell Westhaver or Dr. Ellen Gee, at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Simon Fraser University.

I have been informed that the research material will be held confidential by Russell Westhaver.

I agree to participate in Russell Westhaver's research project by allowing Russell Westhaver to use the interview data gathered with me on [date]. I understand research purposes to mean using these observations for the purposes of thesis research, public speaking engagements, academic conferences, and future publications.

NAME:

SIGNATURE:

WITNESS:

DATE:

ONCE SIGNED, A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM AND A STATEMENT OF RESEARCH PROCEDURE, RISK AND BENEFIT SHOULD BE PROVIDED TO THE SUBJECT.

## *Appendix C*

### *Interview Schedule*

In addition to ethnographic observations, this research was based on interviews with 17 subjects. Interviews were usually conducted at my own premises, but occasionally at the subject's premises—and in one case at the workplace of one subject. Subjects were chosen on the basis of relevance and snowball sampling techniques. Interviews lasted between ninety minutes and two hours. While the following interview schedule was roughly adhered to, the questions were used only as a guide and the interview was, for the most part, open-ended. If interview subjects seemed particularly interested or focused on a particular issue, I followed this line of thought. In some cases, questions were skipped altogether in favour of interesting issues and in one case, a subject asked to see the questions beforehand and then chose to answer only those questions with which he felt comfortable. As is the case with open-ended in-depth interviewing, previous interview experiences came to inform the questions I posed in subsequent interviews.

Questions were roughly broken down into five areas: questions designed to elicit demographic information, questions designed to give interview subjects a chance to outline their history with the circuit, questions asking respondents to compare the circuit with other experiences or institutions, and a set of questions asking interview subjects for their experiences and interpretations of circuit experiences. As a means of giving subjects as much voice as possible, I used an interview technique loosely based on word association. I drew words or issues that emerged as important or salient by virtue of my

participation in the circuit and other interviews and asked subjects to respond to the word or issue in whatever fashion they wished. As a means of creating a limited dialogue I also asked subjects to respond to excerpts from my fieldnotes as well as excerpts from other interviews. I include a selection of examples of these excerpts based around three different themes—the look, notions of community, concerns about peer pressure to attend events or use drugs.

## **Interview Questions**

### *Demographics*

1. Where did you grow up?
2. How old are you?
3. How long have you been in Vancouver?
4. What do you do?

### *Circuit Experience History*

5. Tell me about your first event?
6. So how do you define a circuit party?
7. Most recent event?
8. How many in total?
9. How do you decide which ones to attend?
10. Best circuit party experience?
11. Worst circuit party experience?
12. How do you prepare? What are you thinking about as you plan and get ready—short and long term?

### *Comparative*

13. Can you elaborate on the pleasurable/fun aspects of the circuit?
14. What makes these pleasures different from the baths?
15. What makes these pleasures different from regular nights out?
16. How are circuit parties different from raves?
17. Do you see local circuit like experiences any differently than non-local ones?

### *Experiences and Interpretations*

18. What have you learned about the circuit, yourself, through this history?
19. Why do you go?
20. Any ideas why we—as gay men—go?
21. How do you see yourself in comparison to other guys who do the circuit?
22. Negative feedback from others for doing the circuit or circuit-like things?
23. Who or what do you like seeing at circuit events?
24. Anybody you'd rather not see—if you could have it your way?
25. Tell me about your drug choice/cocktail?
26. What are your thoughts about the sexual charge that seems to be a big part of these events?
27. Ever made a mistake around safer sex?
28. Do you think these events make safer sex more complicated?
29. What do you think about the idea that the circuit is a healing or spiritual experience?
30. How do you know its time to leave?

31. How do you come down?
32. Can you imagine a time when you'll stop going?
33. Questions you might want to pose to others?
34. Any thoughts about this quote from *Circuit Noize* magazine?

A circuit party gives us the chance to escape the pressures of our day-to-day existence and to enter an altered world where friendship, dancing, love, spirituality and self-expression are celebrated. When The Circuit comes to town, that town becomes an instant gay ghetto full of men. This is a big part of the attraction of a circuit party—it gives us the opportunity to take over entire sections of a city, making the restaurants, hotels, and streets into queer spaces.

**Word Association**

- |             |                       |                    |
|-------------|-----------------------|--------------------|
| • GHB       | • Party Pump          | • Messy/sloppy     |
| • Cockring  | • Tweaked/Sketchy     | • Steroids         |
| • Attitude  | • Community           | • Performance/Show |
| • Body Hair | • Cookie-cutter mould | • Viagra           |

**Responses to interview/fieldnote excerpts:**

*Excerpts about “The Look”*

“I don’t want to go because when all the guys take their shirts off I feel fat or small or both.”

“I was really shocked and angry because some of them won’t even look at you—they don’t event look at you, they look right through you.”

One fellow had this to say about his circuit experiences:

“I don’t think you can physically have the circuit body with the group that I hang out with at circuit parties without doing the steroids. And I think that I probably wouldn’t have been doing all this circuit party stuff if I didn’t take steroids because first of all I don’t feel like I fit in, I don’t think I’d feel as aggressive or as sexual about doing this kind of stuff. This is interesting. I think that I continue to take steroids because there’s always another circuit event coming up and I can’t stop because the next events coming so I have to look good for the next event. So its two months away and you’re basically suppose to cycle off your steroids but there’s never enough time to take a break because you have to look good for it, so. And when I talk to other people, everyone’s kind of almost abusing them because the next event’s coming so they can’t look small.”

And a little later on he said:

“I mean a huge part of being gay and my life right now is about the body and looks and its not about much more than that and that’s sad. That scares me because I wonder what its going to be about after. And I know I’m not alone. I think I’m honest with myself about it. I look around and I see a lot of people pretending that that’s not very true, but their working

their ass off at the gym and pretending. I don't get why they are there if that's not part of their reality. So I worry generally about our community and our society because I think—or our segment of the community or society; there's huge segment that doesn't fit this—but for all of us who are trapped in the whole—I call it the body culture—are trapped the whole body culture will find it difficult to get old.”

Another's comments:

“Personally, I wouldn't have as much pleasure going into an event like that if it were filled with fifty percent of fat men or overweight people. I wouldn't get off on that.”

*Excerpts about peer pressure*

One fellow had this to say about his circuit experiences:

“I think the expectation is that everyone is doing them. I think that the expectation is that you will tag along and do what the others are doing. And depending on what group you're hanging with—I think perhaps you'll do more or do other things depending on what individuals you will be hanging out with and not necessarily doing what may be good for you.”

Another fellow said:

“In a very different way, that event had the advantage because it only went till two and there was no after hours. So there wasn't this pressure to go all night. We knew that we had to wrap things up by two o'clock. So that was a big help in taking the pressure off.”

Another's thoughts

“Yeah, I would say sometimes there is pressure. The first couple of times I wanted to go to less parties at Black and Blue I felt there was pressure to go to more, but I think Bill is kind of catching up with at that stage now, starting to realise that less is better. We enjoy ourselves a little bit more.”

“Yeah, I don't know if you'd call it a sub-cultural expectation, but I see these people go to event after event after event, sometimes in succession through a whole weekend or through a whole week. And I think if those people can do it and I can't—then is there something wrong with me or what is special about those people that makes them capable of doing all that? When I ask around my peers I find a lot of people don't like to do those things as much as some others, but yeah, the pressure is from the circuit party crowd itself. There is a little bit of pressure to keep going and going and going, one party after the other after the other.”

*Excerpts about the circuit as a community*

One fellow had this to say:



“It sort of a kind of family. Its an amazing feeling running into everybody. It felt like family, like a weird kind of family experience...I had this group of friends—there was this one moment—like MP, this little porn star guy and I have become friends. But we only see each other at circuit events, but when we see each other there we hang out the whole time and we’re like best buddies. And these guys from Toronto and this couple from Montreal. There’s all these groups of guys who kind of hang out when we’re at these things. So it is community. In a weird way its feels like family...Its an amazing feeling running into everybody. It felt like family, like a weird kind of family experience.”

Another fellow said:

“To be around other gay men, and there’s a real bonding that goes with that. That element to me I have to say is extremely attractive. I love that, even if you’re there with guys twice the size of you, half the size of you, it doesn’t make any difference. It’s the fact that they’re all gay men together in a big room. I love that bonding element of it.”

Another guy felt a bit differently. He had this to say:

“Many gay men separate their sexuality from the rest of their lives because ever since we are young, we are forced to hide that part of ourselves from others and to divorce our sexual side from the rest of our lives. And these events are simply another way for gay men to divorce their sexuality from their humanity. The noise, the inability to communicate with others—this doesn’t allow for any sort of meaningful communication—doesn’t allow people to get to know each other.”

A little later he followed this up with the following idea:

“And this is part of the larger problem we have with continual HIV seroconversion—we still have seroconversion—which means something is wrong—and part of what is wrong is the way we divorce the sexual side of our lives from the human side of our lives.”