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Re-wiring the “Circuit Boy”: The advertising industry’s hegemonization of muscles and the consequences for a gay subculture

**Introduction**

The relationship between novel advertising techniques in the late-20th century male fashion industry and the gay circuit party scene is complex. Style-as-signal (of sexual orientation) had been a foundational concept for the development of a loosely connected male homosexual network (e.g. mail-order magazines and body-building performances) prior to Stonewall’s politicization of the movement. Popular ad-campaigns co-opted a white, muscular body image embraced as an ideal among gay men and prevalent in gay imagery, including physique magazines, comics, and other media. In this subtle co-optation, ad media “inscribed the social attribute of power”[[1]](#endnote-1) by dressing perceivably heterosexual male models with this somatype, and thus conveying that such bodies were worthy of straight men’s aspirations toward somatic masculinity. Among gay men, a mainstreaming of an aesthetic previously read as queer elevated hard-bodied, masculine performance from to an erotic compulsory. Muscular and hegemonic masculine aesthetics, found most concentratedly in queer spaces like the circuit, allowed gay men to attain hegemonic masculinity in the way it undermined the legibility of queerness to hetero/sexist communities. Hegemonic aesthetics marginalized and continues to marginalize queerness, but queer men who aestheticized their bodies according to hegemonic ideals were able to pass as straight, if in the closet, or assimilate into (predominantly urban) spaces beyond gay ghettos.

 In gaining a wider following and more critical attention, circuit parties actualize decades-persistent anxieties about what may occur if late 20th-century homoerotic advertising imagery was taken to its extremes. Not every last person at circuit parties looked or looks like a Calvin Klein model, but such parties have intentionally created spaces where aesthetic homogeneity—based on hegemonic, muscular ideals—is largely achieved. While popular advertising became part of the myriad media from which queer men’s preferences derive, that popular advertising (both previously and simultaneously) borrowed somatic elements from the circuit further deconstructs masculinity as monolithic, implying that hegemonic male body image ideals can be altered so long as the hegemonic attitude and value set remains intact. But after advertising mainstreamed a queer male somatic, what is to be said for the subversion of the circuit? These clones interacting with one another removes the likes of “Marky Mark” from the sexual imaginary and subsequently multiplies him. The visible prevalence of “lavishly muscled” men characteristic of circuit parties, indeed, flouts societal expectations of male dress and masculine reservation in his public life. If interaction between these bodies did not induce enough anxiety, mainstreamed ideal, masculine aesthetics are further dislocated by suggestions that circuit spaces and behaviors are necessarily queer. While the circuit predates these ad campaigns (that themselves heterosexualized bodies previously read as queer), in their wake the parties became an embodied extreme of a world imagined by “novel” ads.

In this paper I explore the evolving and overlapping relations between a queer subcommunity—gay male circuit participants—and commercial advertising, with a particular emphasis on the fashion industry. The new territory I chart is in establishing the relationship between circuit and hetero/sexist commercial advertising as reciprocal, rather than unidirectional. To explore the particularities of this reciprocal influence, I borrow an assertion from Filiault and Drummond (2007) that hegemonic, heterosexist masculinity can be performed through both somatype and attitude (the two of which, together, constitute *aesthetic*).I employ commonly recognized sexual identity categories to distinguish between a presumed majority heterosexual market—a “phantom general audience”[[2]](#endnote-2)— and the gay male market segment. The reason for this, as I posit, is that the phantom market and the gay male market segment often consume popular imagery in different ways. As a gay-identified, cisgender, male, white, educated, toned, upper-middle-class 21-year old man, I possess many of the prerequisite markers for a masculinity that would have been hegemonic in the late 20th century and remain so today. As a genders and sexualities scholar as well as an activist, I feel the tension between my queerness (including encounters with and on the circuit) and engagement with hegemonic masculinity,[[3]](#endnote-3) as gender oppression and homophobia have been primary sources of shame, drivers of performance, and shapers of desire in my life. Throughout, I reflect on a few but relevant personal experiences. In intertwining these retrospectives with academic discussion of media consumption, I call other men to reflect on their complicity and potential moments of victimhood in a hegemonic society with hopes of fostering empathy and underscoring the “interdependence of our struggles for justice.” [[4]](#endnote-4)

**Gaytkeeping: early formations of the circuit**

It was from the bodies that Calvin Klein himself saw dancing about Flamingo in 1974 that he drew inspiration for the aesthetic later sold to millions. "The men at the Flamingo had less to do about sex for him than the notion of portraying men as gods.”[[5]](#endnote-5) It didn’t matter to Klein at the time that these men were probably gay, but rather that their aesthetic was edgy and erotic—something he could package and mass market. This moment is a turning point, where queer culture came to influence the mainstream; converge with hetero/sexist, capitalist trends instead of existing as their negative; and established as bi-directional influence between the popular and an identity-based subculture. That these beautiful boys were gay, at Flamingo, and that Klein also leisured there as a member of New York’s high circles, are not coincidences. As the predecessor to other major gay clubs discussed, such as The Saint, “Flamingo was promoted as the first discotheque for an exclusively gay male clientele.” [[6]](#endnote-6) As a gay space, Flamingo and its contemporaries brought together interactions that had only a) occurred very discretely in real life between men or b) in men’s imaginations through erotica consumption. Given its function as a dance club, it was literally the heat of the moment[[7]](#endnote-7) and the hormonal charge of the space that led men to remove their shirts, making their bodies visible to a clientele whose homosexual desires had been informed by signal-as-style physiques. Necessarily stratifying class dynamics—the key determinant for standards of beauty, according to research—intersected with existing “gendered body aesthetics” to create a filter for permissible bodies in these spaces.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Part of the history upon which the body politics of late-20th century gay clubs built were pre-Stonewall mail-order physique magazines. Johnson examines the development of a gay commercial market (for physique magazines, especially) before that of a national gay political agenda. While it is too simple to say that consumer culture is liberating (and also that it is entirely oppressive compared to other forms of economic governance), the marketplace has been used a site for social mobilization and political power acquisition repeatedly by minority groups.[[9]](#endnote-9) As the physical culture movement gained momentum in the first half of the 20th century, and became tied to masculinity through patriotism and sport, photographers capitalized on a very quiet yet large gay base to which male erotica could be marketed in the form of magazines and catalogues. These exalted bodies—almost exclusively muscular and white—were marketed to gay men, and many consumers sought to attain such bodies. Indeed, many did, and so caught on the desirability of the “clone” look—passably straight (i.e. masculine) to the larger heterosexual communities gays inhabited, but legible to other gay men familiar with clone iconography.[[10]](#endnote-10) The hegemonic, somatic ideal that took shape would become increasingly recognized within the gay community as a growing mass of “out” men started to coalesce around political issues. While gay men are neither the beginning nor the end of queer politics, they constitute a powerful, privileged subculture within the wider diaspora—a diaspora throughout which evolutions occurring in the gay male community ripple quickly. Just as the voices of political queerness grew louder, the gay male community was undergoing an aesthetic renaissance, in which they were succumbing to an “hygienic Western fantasy of a world without any more homosexuals in it.”[[11]](#endnote-11)

These early physique magazines mostly eroticized ‘beefcake’ builds—with muscular definition and mass depicted as directly correlated with stoicism and dominance consistent with hegemonic masculinity’s attitudinal dimension. Later magazines, like *XY Magazine* and *The Advocate* focused far less on “crude” erotica and much more on discussing issues within the gay community. A new market *The Advocate* hoped to incorporate into its consumer base was gay youth, appealing to them through discussion of topics that marked their place in the transition period of the 1980s and 1990s for the larger gay community. *XY Magazine* and others attempted to foster pride and positive feelings toward gay teenagers’ queerness, leading to an association of pride with community participation, and necessarily interpersonal connection.[[12]](#endnote-12) At this point, I say, "Enter: circuit” as a platform for such pride, participation, and erotic activity that welcomed young men with open arms…and hard dicks. While circuit was not the only outlet for community development by the time these teenagers came of age (late 1990s and early 2000s) circuit parties were an opportunity for the most concentrated gay interactions, whether those be homosocial or homosexual (and often both). Combining the sex appeal of the kinds of bodies previously seen exclusively in erotica magazines[[13]](#endnote-13) with youth sexual curiosity and a desire for gay community participation in the gay made circuit a venue to be experienced.

*I was 18, and 3 weeks into a month-long international business course in Barcelona. I hadn’t yet checked out the nude beach—Marabella—and felt like it was a bucket list item I should cross off before I left the city. So I got on the metro and headed the direction opposite the one I usually traveled to get from class in the morning to the gym. I was nervous. Would I take my speedo off? Before crossing that bridge, how did I look in my speedo? Was I big enough? Hablaría bien suciamente en español, or was I best sticking with English?*

*The walk from the train station to the beach was longer than I had expected, so the anticipation built. But by the time I came over the dunes, I was not confronted by any of the scenarios through which I’d run during the walk. This was a nude beach, but was it typically this gay? I took a quick gulp of air, adjusted my sunglasses and strowed into the deepening sand with all the confidence I could muster. My head was tilted up, as if to suggest I was looking above the erotic sprawl before me. My tightening speedo betrayed my gaze, tilted down underneath my tinted sunglasses. I simultaneously people-watched and frantically searched for a spot in the sand. Where the fuck did all of these beautiful men come from? I wondered.*

*Any space that wasn’t filled by a body seemed like a good one to put my towel and drawstring bag. I bent over—a mistake—to set my things down, and before my body even made contact with my towel, I was cat-called by the throaty voice of an American sailor. Before long, his beefcake fiancée and their other American friends came over to introduce themselves. What was everybody doing here, I asked the sailor, who I would have sex with later that afternoon.*

*“It’s Circuit in Barcelona,” he said, as if it were as obvious that we were standing under the beating sun on a beach. “Are you coming to the waterpark party tomorrow?”*

Assumption of the clone look[[14]](#endnote-14) was important for extricating effeminacy from homosexuality in the minds of members within the community, which mimics rather than subverts the gender oppression of a wider hetero/sexist society.[[15]](#endnote-15) According to Pointek, work was done to “cultivat[e] a new gay identity and a new gay culture based on the gender differences that lay at the heart of [homosexuality as a] new diagnostic category.”[[16]](#endnote-16) Longitudinally tracing this subculture’s dynamics–such as use of the body as expression through dance, the importance of space, and different parties’/venues' varying degrees of exclusivity–is helpful in connecting mainstream gender and sexuality phenomena to evolving identities within the gay male community. The role of the body in the circuit’s unfinished arc is at least partially legislated by the hegemonic somatic masculinity that queer muscular aesthetics had influenced.

For those queer bodies considered beautifully muscled, mainstream advertising acknowledged gays’ somatic masculinity even if it didn’t do the same for their queerness. For gay males with non-beautiful bodies, perceptions of or experiences on the circuit can and have induced shame, incentivizing them to transform their bodies or to otherwise feel alienated from hetero/sexist modes of gender expression. As beautiful bodies began to multiply outside of clubs like The Saint in the 1980s and at events like Red Party in Columbus starting beginning in the late 1970s, beautiful gay boys were able to mediate marginalization of their queerness by no longer being legibly gay, and simultaneously acquired privilege through their bodies within many queer circles. The growing number of circuit parties expanded the avenues accessible to the men who had decorated their bodies with muscles to retain their statuses as masculine beyond gay ghettos, accrue erotic capital to attract sex partners, and perform queerness as a point of connection with potential gay friends.

One of the most renowned spaces for the circuit was The Saint during the 1980s in New York, where parties with circuit sensibilities were arguably the most densely concentrated. Even after its official close in 1988, The Saint continued to hold its awe-inspiring parties around Manhattan, as if to preserve its spirit, to continue with the religious metaphor. This poster,[[17]](#endnote-17) of a young, white, muscular man being wrapped up from behind by a set of arms belonging to a much larger white man (the rest of whose figure is not depicted) gives important information about the demographics of the participant base: majority-white, middle-upper class, muscular men. While not all circuit parties or clubs with circuit sensibilities had as homogenous a clientele as The Saint, other scholars affirm that this was a prevailing trend at most circuit sites (Carrington estimates that over 75 percent of White Party, Palm Springs attendees in 2001 were white).[[18]](#endnote-18)

While designers like Klein may have been influenced in New York, the circuit was a nationwide phenomenon. In fact, the circuit has since become international. (As I later describe, my first encounter with the circuit was in Barcelona, Spain.) All circuit parties, regardless of location, mimic the sweaty, charged, urban environment of the New York and Los Angeles clubs in which it was born,[[19]](#endnote-19) all the while creating a space big enough to host men that make the pilgrimage from all over. This photoset of the HotLanta Hotmen party[[20]](#endnote-20) starkly portrays the homogeneity of large gay gatherings. HotLanta Hotmen despite gaining particular notoriety for ‘body fascism,’ was not a radical departure from the character of other parties. The photos draw particular attention to the homogeneity of participants’ body image(s?) and racial segregation of social networks that are often features of circuit parties. While these shots are from the early 1990s rather than the 1980s, HotLanta began in 1988, suggesting that similar dynamics existed in preceding years, and that it is chronologically and thematically in-line with gay, circuit-like dance parties in highly urbanized spaces.

**Are male models sex objects? Effects of the solo shot and control of “the gaze”**

Muscularity and male body image ideals were particularly prominent in but not limited to advertising of the fashion industry. This 1994 Diet Coke ad[[21]](#endnote-21) depicts female front-office staff alerting one another that a construction worker outside their office building is about to take his “Diet Coke break” as he removed his flannel and cotton undershirt (he does not appear to be sweating). As they crowd around the window, his shirtless consumption of the beverage captures their attention, and one woman is even shown to be looking at her friends as though his capturing of their attention generates additional attraction. On its face, his purpose in the ad is to capture the female gaze, but more strategically his beautiful body is created by and for the aim of his performing construction work. His toned muscles serve a purpose, providing the additional possibility that straight men identify with him because his strong performance on the job is an accounted-for masculine imperative. Bordo nuances (but generally upholds) John Berger’s praxis that 'men act and women appear.'[[22]](#endnote-22) Through the end of the 20th century, advertising positioned greater attention to one’s appearance as a middle-class, task-oriented, ‘no-nonsense masculinity.’[[23]](#endnote-23) Looking good was rendered purposeful for class mobility rather than simply for preening the way women, men of ethnic minorities, and queer men were inclined. Attention to looks, and specifically the accessorized body, became safe for masculine men to practice without their hegemonic status as males being threatened. Product advertisements increasingly showed beautiful men without the previously necessary appearance of the female(s), allowing such brands to market their products as tasteful for straight and gay bodies alike.

In 1983, with an underwear ad featuring athletic sensation Tom Hintinauss, a new era began for Calvin Klein.[[24]](#endnote-24) The ad depicts Hintinauss not doing anything except sunbathing, which would jeopardize his masculinity, save for the fact that he is an Olympic icon and his body language non-standoffish. Where he may be feminized for assuming the role of performing beauty without a purpose, his athletic accomplishments and noticeably large penis compensate. The balance achieved in this advertisement—mitigating the feminization resulting from engagement in a beautifying activity (sunbathing) with other signifiers of masculinity (e.g. athleticism legible through physique)—did not occur without attention by artists and producers. Companies fairly assumed that their largely heterosexual consumers were unaware of the queer heritage from which “edgy” aesthetics were borrowed, in this instance allowing advertisements to subsume an historically queer pattern of muscular ornamentation under modes of hegemonic male gender expressions. Important was not whether the history of these muscles was straight or gay, but that the models who donned them were portrayed as the pinnacles of embodied manhood. Shifting hegemonic ideals of somatic masculinity may have de-queered muscles, but was less than “edgy” in its profiting from the reconstruction of gender hierarchies based on physiological and biological differences.

Calvin Klein (brand) indeed varied the elements of imagery targeting a male consumer base. In contrast to the Hintinauss image, Mark Wahlberg (for the Obsession™ fragrance campaign) is quite defiant and wields his masculinity by taking his bulge into his hand.[[25]](#endnote-25) This image, which has remained culturally salient for decades, infuses the gendered meanings of a muscular body[[26]](#endnote-26) with the operations and connotations of the phallus. The control Wahlberg exerts over the consumer’s gaze subverts suggestions that he is a “sex object." Instead, as a sex subject, his physique is part and parcel of mainstream masculinity ideations. So far, my claims have avoided the variation within markets caused by consumer preferences and identities, thus failing to account for the diverse readings of advertisements simply because of sexual and gender identities. Attracting queer consumers was and is still not an insignificant consideration for companies (or smart ones), incentivizing the development of ideals recognized as such across consumer preferences and identities. Subjects with whom the gay consumer may have sexual fantasies, then, may also be homosocially attractive to straight men—“the kind of man” with whom they want to associate, emulate, or narcissistically identify. In fact, homogeneity would make marketing more profitable, as “‘consumer markets are best supported by markets made up of sexual clones.’”[[27]](#endnote-27)

The hegemonic aestheticization of queer male somatics rolled sexual desirability and a new standard of male hetero/sexist embodied masculinity into one, allowing brands to attract increased numbers from multiple segments of the market. To do so, however, the aforementioned balance of images relied on the sexual ambiguity of the male models. Bordo implies that, during his visit to The Flamingo in 1974, Klein borrowed ‘the look’ from the beautiful boys as much as he did the concealment of their sexualities. In fact, it was only because of their lack of flamboyance that Klein was able to be read as masculine. “‘Sex, as Calvin Klein knew, sells. He also knew that gay sex wouldn’t sell to straight men. But the rock-hard bodies that Klein admired in the Flamingo did not advertise their sexual preferences through feminine codes […] which the straight world then identified with homosexuality.’”[[28]](#endnote-28) Although heterosexual ideals, packaged in the clone, had entirely permeated gay culture,[[29]](#endnote-29) there was nothing inherently queer about the somatype itself. Quite the opposite, the gay rendition of the macho look was somatically consistent with attitudinal markers of hegemonic masculinity that were an easy set of selling points to the phantom heterosexual mass market. Not all credit to the lavishly muscled queers has been lost, however. As Weems notes, since Klein’s discovery in 1974, the general public has come to appreciate that a “rock-hard masculine body is no longer the sole domain of Straight men.”[[30]](#endnote-30)

While appealing to multiple audiences was not a new concept in advertising, increased sexual ambiguity was at least partially attributable to the lack of female object in the male solo shots that were becoming more common in late 20th century advertising. Without the female object to create a network of gazes—and a tension that necessitates activity by the male subject—what is a man’s purpose (the masculine man always has a purpose)? Bordo suggests that just because the male instead of the female is being looked at, this does not entail his occupation of a passive, emasculating position. His body language evinces his preserved activity. Even when body language is less overtly aggressive, “inviting, receiving and responding” behaviors are active ones rather than passive, which challenges the application to popular media of dominant-submissive or active-passive binaries. Male body language in such imagery can posit alternative modes of masculinity and provoke variant reactions within viewers, but Bordo argues that the models remain in control of the spectator’s gaze, which distinguishes them from (often female) “sex objects” in advertising.

Sexual ambiguity in audiencing is not simply a retroactive reading of advertising techniques. Klein himself articulated that it is critical to refresh the kinds of images offered to consumers in advertisements lest dullness come to be associated with the brand’s marketing and/or products. Like is true in the fragrance/Wahlberg and underwear/Hintinauss ads, and especially in the latter, the lack of other bodies in the shot leaves the consumer unable to relativize the body and behavior depicted, allowing more room for interpretation. Bordo argues that a feature of post-modern advertising makes images more reactive to one another while they used to be reactive primarily to social trends.[[31]](#endnote-31) This advertisement[[32]](#endnote-32) sends mixed signals about male body, coded as masculine, assuming the role of sexual invitee rather than active pursuant. The consumer interpreting this gaze, information about the body, and essence of the advertisement does gender in ways that vary across market segments and over time.

*I said that my first encounter with the circuit was in Barcelona in 2016, but upon reflection, that was not my first exposure to circuit sensibilities and aesthetics. Before I knew what the circuit was, I had aspired toward much of the presentation it celebrates. How did this happen?*

*As an athlete from an early age, and as one still today, I am partially a product of my environment. The association between muscles, performance, and control became more embedded and more foundational for my construction of male gender and masculine aesthetics than I had realized. But the gym and the poolhave not been the only spaces that held up a mirror and shaped preferences. I distinctly remember commenting on male actors’ attractiveness—all of them having cropped hair, tight bodies with rippling muscles, and steely gazes—as a pre-pubescent child in front of my family (although they claimed not to have had “any idea” when I came out to them two days before my seventeenth Christmas). These actors were as handsome as the male models I had seen in ads, but they had the personalities and lifestyles to match. It never mattered to me that they “got the girl” and not the boy—that was a given and the women were never the point, anyways. They were fleshy action figures that were depicted as having control of the world around them—just like one day I wanted to. That was hot.*

*Flash forward to the day I created Instagram. Then a tumblr “spank bank” ( pornography archive), where clone and beefcake aesthetics reign supreme while alternatives are fetishized or otherwise marginalized. Then a Grindr profile, where you pay with your dignity and morals to play. Talk about world-making! I mention these moments not to be crass or comedic, depending on the degree to which you link the two, but to provide insights into the ambush of boys and young men by hegemonic aesthetics inspired by the circuit and reproduced in other media. There are moments where I, and many other (especially gay) boys, were desperate to fill in blanks left by heteronormativity. In our search for selves, the most accessible answers lay in the most heterosexist, homophobic, and shame-inducing material. Media inscribed meaning on the bodies by which I had been frequently surrounded from an early age. My own body, experiences, and shame are the spaces on and in which this meaning lives.*

Operating as part of the vanguard and using the “edgy” may have worked for Klein, but there is a limited set of options for companies attempting to retain customers. In marketing to a predominantly heterosexual phantom audience, the range of permissible depictions of men is far narrower than that of women, especially when it comes to the amount of skin shown. To analyze the way that men and women approach male and female cisgender nude images differently, Eck (2003)[[33]](#endnote-33) shows 45 interviewees equally numbered varieties of (cis) male and female nudes, and solicits their responses after having accounted for a thorough set of socio-demographic vectors of the respondents. Men reacted with disinterest or rejection to most images of nude males, but the male interviewees, like their female counterparts, focused their attention mostly on the *Playgirl* image. Studies of *Playgirl* centerfolds, especially by the time of the study, had come to depict increasingly muscular ideals of male body image.[[34]](#endnote-34) Assuming that the image was of a muscular man, the only difference between him and male fashion models, for example, was that he was naked and his sexuality foregrounded. I argue that men and women assigned the most weight to this image because its similarity to other media that perpetuate, reproduce, and amplify male body image ideals while at the same time departing from more popularly consumed media in its overt display of sexuality. Study participants rejected it because the sexualization of these ideals was unpalatable, not because the ideals were perceived as problematic. Nudity here, for depictions of males, acts as the aesthetic upper limit on techniques advertisers can successfully employ to appeal across preferences.

Male and female nudity are met with different kinds of criticism in the advertising world, as they were in the study.[[35]](#endnote-35) In 1971, the Yves Saint Laurent (brand) ran an ad featuring a nude of its namesake designer. In internet searches, there were no other advertisements around that time featuring fully nude males, which lends support to Eck’s hypothesis that exposure to certain imagery plays an important role in consumers’ ability to engage with its content. The image also depicts a slim Yves Saint Laurent relatively relative to the youthful, smooth beefcakes that filled magazine spreads and lived on billboards in the ensuing decades. A lack of certainty that ads with risqué depictions of men will be profitable results in more cautious approaches, like shirtless torsos and clothed midsections. Ads featuring nude women, however, did and still do bring in more revenue. In the 1992 campaign for Calvin Klein’s *Obsession*™ fragrance, a topless Kate Moss straddles Mark Wahlberg and poses in a solo shot with her breast exposed.[[36]](#endnote-36) The two are dressed quite differently. The company received complaints for the advertisements, not because Moss was topless and far more exposed than Wahlberg, but because of her age at the time.

While nudity was a way of foregrounding sexuality, it was not the only way of doing so. As time went on, brands, particularly in the fashion industry, pushed the envelope by making sexuality less ambiguous, and also less heterosexual. In instances where queer sexualities were portrayed, consumers unsurprisingly wrestled with the meaning behind this advertising technique, as this blog post demonstrates.[[37]](#endnote-37) This secondary source represents a candid (prejudiced, but not overly extreme) line of hetero/sexist questioning that ensues a “blatant” challenge to heterosexual norms of consumption. The poster argues that a 3-panel Armani Exchange advertisement (the central panel occupied by a straight couple embracing one another, and flanked on either side by a gay couple and lesbian couple doing the same) as “in your face.” The female blogger asks pointed questions about “whether this is wrong or just portraying what’s going on in our culture?” and whether “you would want to see this displayed […] as you were walking down Fashion Ave or in malls?” The interpretation of visible homosexuality as a radical, political confrontation speaks to the line brands must tow to attract new but also retain existing customers. Like Eck’s interviewees’, the blogger’s uncertainty stems from a lack of exposure and underdeveloped vocabulary to assess an image she has not elected to view. Indeed, some of the men in Eck’s study admitted feeling that if they looked for “too long” at the *Playgirl* image or other male nudes, their heterosexuality may be threatened. Anxieties about male sexuality, and especially about homosexuality, may drive men to find release in space and through behaviors such as the circuit that are not always particularly healthy.

**The AIDS epidemic and gay rehabilitation of mainstreamed aesthetics**

As somatic masculinities were being borrowed from a fledgling circuit starting in the 1970s, the possible range of gender expressions witnessed intense narrowing around the circuit subculture’s aesthetic. “[T]he ‘macho man’ was the sole gender style openly marketed to the emerging gay male community as the appropriate sexual object-choice…Indeed, the bathhouse and sex club, the apex of that culture at the time throughout urban America, was a place for macho men to meet macho men, and the effeminately attired man or the drag queen was not welcome.”[[38]](#endnote-38) During the 1980s, the AIDS epidemic claimed bodies that had frequented the circuit and touched off a new era of politicized queerness. Aesthetic gatekeepers of the circuit during the 1970s,1980s, and 1990s—arguably the most sexually active queer subculture at the time—were hit hard by AIDS. The circuit and its aesthetics responded to the intense grief and anxieties of the epidemic.

Queer male sexualities started to become equated with visible changes to the body (due to the development of HIV into AIDS), thus demonizing queer men and making them more readily identifiable once again. Whether they were tragically outed by their deaths, cast out of their social networks with nowhere to turn but the LGBT community, or they came out of the closet voluntarily, “outness” assumed a new significance in both individual and collective senses. Outness is relevant to both HIV seropositivity prior to the onset of AIDS (at which point the disease becomes more visible) and to queerness. Increased outing—involuntary or self-driven—of PWHA gave rise to a larger political mass including other queer people. The AIDS epidemic also drove outness among HIV-negative allies—those who stood in solidarity with members of their networks living with or lost to HIV/AIDS. It became more obvious that queerness was not a peripheral identity, but bore the potential for real political, health, and social consequences. While the AIDS epidemic was and remains a profound tragedy in this country’s history, it significantly increased the proximity of urban queer communities through activism, socializing, and mourning.[[39]](#endnote-39)

In a hetero/sexist culture that continued circulation of a hegemonically appropriated queer male body image, both HIV-negative and HIV-positive men sought to retain masculine statuses. For those with physically noticeable symptoms, macho clone and beautiful beefcake self-images were shattered. A 2009 interview-based study conducted by Kelly et al.[[40]](#endnote-40) shows that body image preoccupation is a prevalent phenomenon among PWHA and those on HAART. Noticeable effects of the disease on the body were shown to deter interviewees from social engagements. The high value on appearance and significant body image investment (meant to attract other gays’ gazes) “may lead to extreme strategies to maintain appearance,” including later use of steroids. The emphasis on healthy appearance encouraged gays to rehabilitate their individual images and, more collectively, the wider gay male community’s. What resulted was a marked increase in behaviors meant to alter appearances and better performances on the circuit and in stigmatized sex lives to counter fears of wasting bodies.

With the AIDS epidemic capturing significant attention by the queer community, and especially among gay men in the last two decades of the 20th century, gay and straight ad media came to increasingly promote behaviors as well as products. However, both kinds of campaigns leveraged similar aesthetics, and in the gay ghettos of urban spaces, this usually affirmed muscular clones as the preferred sexual object-choice. Educational posters, like this one distributed by the Health Education Resource Organization (HERO) in Baltimore,[[41]](#endnote-41) couched normative masculine aesthetics in health consciousness; these men invest in their bodies and are responsible more likely to prevent spread of the disease through condom use. The AIDS epidemic was a new, opportune fulcrum for associating fit aesthetics and morality. Eroticized hegemonic body image ideals were again used to attract the gay gaze, not to target subgroups of it that were most impacted. Tying investment in body image to investment in positive health outcomes via HIV prevention

helped solidify the notion that appearance evinced the status of one's health.[[42]](#endnote-42)

It does not come as a surprise that the politicized AIDS epidemic attracted increased critical attention to the circuit, an environment and culture responsible a) for spreading the disease and b) for HIV/AIDS research fundraising contributions. In 1998, *The New York Times* columnist Frank Bruni commented wrote about circuit parties.**[[43]](#endnote-43)** In Bruni’s article, he mentions that circuit boys are “lavishly muscled” and “wealthy enough to buy plane tickets and plenty of drugs like cocaine, Ecstasy and ketamine, or ‘special K.'” Muscles, drug use, and wealth being packaged as prerequisites for circuit participation, which is not untrue, renders the circuit a middle-upper class experience, and links it to irresponsible behaviors like intoxication and sex parties. Bruni’s article brings the “circuit boy” archetype, rather than simply his body, out of the queer lexicon and into the popular imaginary.

Circuit parties can seem almost lawless, an image cultivated by heavy illicit drug use, which would then make “circuit boys/queens” outlaws. While studies have shown that using such substances is, at minimum, a precursor to unsafe behaviors—sexual or otherwise— O’Byrne and Holmes 2011[[44]](#endnote-44) suggest that intoxicants are used as a means of overcoming inhibitions to desires that are formed while participants are not under the influence. They use desire as a frame, concluding that men at gay circuit parties are motivated by desire to “be seen” (validated) and to connect with one another, both through sexual and non-sexual interactions.

Criticism of the circuit often focuses on the behaviors of its participants. Concerns about rampant synthetic drug use, unsafe sexual behaviors, and its absorption of queer capital and political attention are all valid, and should be the foci of further research among scholars. However, such opinions often fail to acknowledge the function of the spaces circuit creates—spaces that are subversive in that they are queer worlds. Carrington takes an ethnographic approach to the circuit, an exercise he claims is important for shrinking the gulf between judgments scholars have expressed about the circuit and circuit participants’ reflections on their own experiences. Carrington recognizes that many circuit participants are privileged in that they likely face relatively little overt discrimination during the week days, and Weems furthers this claim by revealing that gay men’s queer and straights social networks are less compartmentalized than they once were.[[45]](#endnote-45) Regardless, supporters maintain the circuit preserves an overt “political character…for these events challenge the heteronormative quality of everyday life and they unrepentantly affirm the worthiness and beauty of gay male homoerotic desire.”[[46]](#endnote-46)

*I turned 21 in Washington, D.C. as a summer intern. I’m a Leo, so I only had about 3 weeks there to go out. Having met my boyfriend earlier in the summer (at the gym, no less), the places we knew we would have the most fun when we chose to go out were the gay nightclubs and bars frequented by members of his larger, better-developed network. This time, circuit didn’t need to come to the city on a cruise ship. D.C.’s gay population, and especially the young professionals still enthused by the scene, are routinely out in full force. Circuit boys, at least to me, seemed indigenous to this urban jungle.*

*One of my first stops was Echostage, one of the world’s best rave venues. Two DJs, whose sets were state-altering (even for those like me that hadn’t already altered their state) and whose names I forget, spun tables for the entire six or so hours that I was there. Even though Echostage isn’t a circuit venue, there was an entire quadrant of the warehouse occupied by some of D.C.’s hottest gays, all but a few of which dancing shirtless as if this were Winter Party in Miami, and some in harnesses as if this was Black Party in New York. I don’t remember ever having my shirt on inside the warehouse, and neither did my boyfriend. Having been 21 for all of a week, I looked like fresh meat, even though I knew better than they thought I did how to handle the scene.*

*Washington in the summer is hot. The huge flock of shirtless boys did not fail to remind anybody, either. I watched as the light bounced off their bodies, glossy from the sweat that was a mainstay. The lights from the back of the warehouse turned them into one-dimensional silhouettes, but when they weren’t creating such an illusion, the strobes from the front blanched the quadrant’s mostly white skin. I remember, save for the handful handsome black and Latino men we had danced with, feeling almost embarrassed by how white we were.*

*Capsules of G(HB) floated around like candy. Halloween apparently came most weekends. My boyfriend and our friends popped “doses,” staggering them, I thought, quite responsibly. I was having a wonderful time, and I was glad that they were, too, but I was also intrigued. It all felt so childish, even though I was the ‘baby’ and this was actually quite novel. Nonetheless, I was committed to losing myself in the moment. While my biceps may not have been up to par, I had looked like a circuit boy for years, and I was validated for it then. Boys, boys, boys came up, brushing their hands over my body, and me mine over theirs. They loved my abs. They also loved my boyfriend, which I dind’t mind. Some grabbed my butt. Yes, it was objectifying, but I took for granted the lack of malice and aggression that seemed inherent to queer enclaves. The codes are just different. Not everything, and actually hardly anything at all, is loaded with political meaning as it is in real life.*

*The next week, I saw many of the rave-goers in our quadrant at the gym. Prepping for the following weekend, during which I also saw and danced with many of them at a club called Cobalt. As a novice, I unsuccessfully tried to make conversation with boys from my spin clasess and men who owned three properties in a city with a housing crisis and consultants and sugar babies with fewer ambitions. Queers had seemed for a long time like the people with the most candid delivery, the most interesting experiences, and an emotional sophistication many straight people aren’t familiar. But there was no depth here, and there didn’t seem to be potential for achieving it in this environment moving forward. How could people—smart, engaged, and many successful—do this every weekend?*

*At one point, a drunk acquaintance—a hot, blond Army Captain—who I had conversations with on Instagram before meeting in real life, approached my boyfriend and me. Although not fully there, he sort of desperately exclaimed: “You know what? You guys are it. Everybody sees you, and everybody wants that.” What can one do besides return an awkward smile, feigning flattery? As great as the free drinks from our bartending friend had been, the effects of them wore off in that moment. I became painfully aware that the circuit was where we went with hopes that we would be looked at, but stayed* to look*, to remind ourselves of the reasons for our loneliness, tendencies, and shame.*

**Conclusion**

My response is one simple question: At what cost does an affirmation of homoeroticism come? Having established that it is the circuit that partially inspired a neoliberal renovation of the hegemonic masculine aesthetic, it is impossible to make out a case that men come to circuit parties to escape body fascism. In fact, it’s quite the opposite; the circuit is predominantly white and demands conformity of its participants’ bodies. Returning to a queer deconstruction of monolithic masculinity, that leaves the attitudinal dimension of hegemonic masculinity left to be challenged. The total queerness of circuit parties—the cited political challenge to this attitudinal hegemonic masculinity—is not enough to provide the escape sought out by attendees if psychedelics, among other substances, are necessary. There is individual harm in this sense. Prolonged and consistent usage of illicit drugs and abuse of alcohol may result in negative health outcomes, even if those are not realized for years are decades. Using the circuit as one’s only escape, and failing to engage with queer people in non-ecstatic capacities, forestalls reconciliation of the shame that all men carry, to some degree. On a more collective level, the corporeal perpetuation of hegemonic masculine aesthetics works across queer male subcultures to otherize non-beautiful bodies, and undermines the work of feminists and queer women to tear down gendered hierarchies based in part on physicality.

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