

## When I Think of Pulse, I Think of Shakti

Michael Hames-García

In memoriam: Elie Wiesel (1928–2016) and Jean Charles da Silva e de Menezes (1978–2005)

“Where were you in ‘92?”

—M.I.A., “XR2,” *Kala* (2007)

London. In 1992, I was twenty years old and studying abroad. Coming from a provincial background and being still under the U.S. legal drinking age, I eagerly dove into London’s overlapping rave and gay club scenes. My first night out alone, I met a group of Londoners—hailing from England, Iran, Italy, and Spain—who invited me to join them at a club the following night. The club was Shakti, located in the basement of a community center, and the only London club specifically for queer South Asians. That night, the guys who invited me were late, leaving my socially awkward self to wander about looking—as I was later told—like a confused, just out, half-Pakistani boy in over his head. This fortunate situation led me to fall in with the young men who would round out my London “crew”: a Tanzania-born, lower-caste Indian (who took pity on me and struck up a conversation), a Sikh, a British Indian, a white Englishman, and a Dane. This cohort of mostly brown and immigrant men taught me so much about how to be gay. For example, that it was okay to make out with a man at the club and not go home with him because leaving with my friends was safer, more considerate, and usually more fun. But also that being queer and brown was beautiful and that even though I wasn’t exactly “brown” in the same way, there would always be people who would claim me as one of their own. And

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despite its institutional venue, Shakti was the best club I had never imagined. The music was mostly Bhangra and completely new to me. What I loved most, though, was the sheer glee of Shakti's patrons: a giddy combination of freedom and belonging that I would later find at black and brown queer spaces in the United States: Escuelita, Two Potato, Esta Noche, Bench and Bar, Escándalo, Chico, and others. Shakti: the divine energy of life.

The connection and permeability of Shakti lay far from the proclamations of difference and separation that undergird nationalism, patriotism, and nativism. After Orlando, hearing others' responses, I have wondered if I might be wired wrong. The first substantive piece I read about the event was by John Paul Brammer in *Slate*. And here's what I can't identify with, what I can't find in my own response: "Us. They killed us." I would be lying if I said I didn't *understand* the greater tendency toward empathy and identification that comes from seeing others as more like oneself. I understand it, but don't share it. And when others expect me to share their preference for "people like us," I pause. Perhaps this is why I haven't participated in any of the collective acts of mourning for the Orlando victims. I sense that others expect me to be affected by this incident more deeply than by news that on February 15, 2016 missiles leveled a Doctors without Borders hospital in Idlib, Syria, killing 25 staff members, patients, and caregivers.

Both events move me beyond words. If one moves you more, perhaps that's normal. But I hope you will consider, as Ramón Rivera-Servera argued in an interview with the *Atlantic*, that Orlando was a tragedy not just for queer Latinx communities. It was also a tragedy for Muslim-American communities, queer and straight. "Our" pain will subside with time, helped along by private and public rituals of mourning. "Their" pain will increase with the ascendancy of Trump and nationalist and Islamophobic responses to subsequent terror attacks in France, Germany, and Turkey. Omar Mateen took "our" lives, but he might demarcate "their" sense of freedom and delimit the possibilities for "their" belonging for years to come. Among my post-9/11 memories is this: a good friend asking if he could bring his daughter to my house because there was a swing set in the backyard; being South Asian, he worried about taking his daughter to the public playground.

Because of how I understand my brownness and queerness, because of how I understand my humanity, I must reject any dichotomy between "us" and "them." I remember wanting to check in with my London friends in July 2005, after terrorists exploded bombs on London Underground trains and a double-decker bus, killing 52 and injuring 700. A footnote to those attacks was the shooting two weeks later of a Brazilian electrician, Jean Charles da Silva e de Menezes, by London Police. Police mistook him for a bombing suspect and shot him eight

times. De Menezes looked about as Arab as I do, reminding me that for both terrorists and the state, brown bodies can be interchangeable. One day we are victims. The next day we are suspects.

Trump enlisted the Orlando deaths in accepting the Republican Party's nomination for U.S. president, without acknowledging that the dead were overwhelmingly, although not exclusively, Latinx—just as they were overwhelmingly, although not exclusively, queer. The porosity of communities in spaces like Pulse and Shakti was a part of my education in how to be gay. My London crew included the first Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs I had ever met personally. Several of them became my first Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh friends (and lovers), although this wasn't how I thought of them at the time. At the time, they were simply queer brown men who were kind enough to befriend a Chicano hick from Oregon and to put up with an American mate who didn't know how rounds worked at a pub. I can't live in a world where empathy is defined primarily by similarities between myself and others. That's *their* world: the world of Trump and Daesh. I refuse to allow it to become mine.

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**Michael Hames-García** is professor in the Department of Ethnic Studies at the University of Oregon, where he has also been director of the Center for Race, Ethnicity, and Sexuality Studies (CRESS; 2006–2011) and director of the Center for the Study of Women in Society (CSWS; 2014–2015). He is the author of *Identity Complex: Making the Case for Multiplicity* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011), *Gay Latino Studies: A Critical Reader* (Duke University Press, 2011), and *Fugitive Thought: Prison Movements, Race, and the Meaning of Justice* (University of Minnesota Press, 2004), and editor of *Identity Politics Reconsidered* (Palgrave, 2006) and *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism* (University of California Press, 2000).