

Practices

Raving

McKenzie Wark

MORE PRAISE FOR *RAVING*

“McKenzie Wark has done it again! With her personal journey into questioning the foundations of everything from how capitalism works to the way our bodies and very identities are under radical transformation, Wark breaks it all down. A must-read for those who are interested in the evolution of digital music and the way it has reshaped the world around us.”

—Paul D. Miller, a.k.a. DJ Spooky, author of *Rhythm Science*

“With loving precision, McKenzie Wark’s eyes and ears pay attention to the innumerable tiny interactions, gestures, and rites that make up the all-night drug-and-dance party. *Raving* radiantly understands the rave as a construction site for transitory kinship structures—a pocket in timespace that is a haven for fugitives from consensus banality—a miniature home world for the aliens already on this planet. Ravers occupy the city’s abandoned places and turn them into zones of abandon, where identities dissolve, where you can lose yourself and find

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yourself. Wark's work is a font of deliriously inventive and witty language—immerse yourself in her text to discover speaker demons, rave condoms, punishers, and sidechain time."

—Simon Reynolds, author of *Energy Flash: A Journey through Rave Music and Dance Culture*

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A series edited by Margret Grebowicz

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“And thus, when knowledge has passed through infinity, grace returns; such that it appears in its purest form simultaneously either in that human physique which is none, or in the one that has an infinite consciousness—in the marionette, or in the God.”

“Therefore,” I said a bit confused, “we would have to eat from the tree of knowledge yet again, so as to relapse into a state of innocence?”

“Indeed,” he answered; “this is the last chapter in the history of the world.”

—**Heinrich von Kleist**, “On the Marionette Theater,”

trans. Luce deLire

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For all my scouts and ravens

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Practices series editor Margret Grebowicz asked me on July 27, 2021, if I could submit a book for the series by September 22, 2021. In a moment of pure mania, I said yes. Apart from commissioned articles I hadn't done any real book-project writing that I was happy with since I started hormones in 2018. Your request helped me break a curse, so thank you, Margret.

I already had some bits, at least. The opening paragraphs of "Rave as Practice" appeared in *Unter: Rave Posters*, vol. 1, 2015–2020 (Brooklyn, NY: Untermaid Products, 2021). An earlier version of "Xeno-euphoria" appeared in *Noon Journal*, no. 12 ("New Communities"). I also used a version of that text for Side A of a spoken-word Bandcamp album I made during the 2020 lockdown called *Lonesome Cowgirl*, over a mix by Nick Bazzano. It was also half of a talk I gave via Zoom for HKW in Berlin on Mark Fisher's "acid communism." The "Ketamine Femmunism" text grew out of the other half of that. Part of "Excessive Machine" was first performed with a track by Body

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Thanks for helpful feedback to the GiDEST seminar fellows at the New School and the graduate students at the Prague Academy of Fine Art. Special thanks to all my students at Eugene Lang College and in Liberal Studies at the New School.

Thanks to my Duke external readers, especially Reader Two, who had homework for me. Thanks to everyone at Duke. Thanks to Lira Yin for calligraphy.

Thanks to Trans Twitter. No, really. I've learned a lot from parasocial trans and trans-adjacent friends and acquaintances, some I know or at least have met IRL but many not.

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I'm grateful beyond words to my New York queer and trans raver communities. A special shout-out to those who work in nightlife: on logistics, on the door, behind the bar, on sound and light, as safer space monitors. I see you, and I'm thankful for the situations you make for us, with their difficult poise between safety and possibility.

Cheers to everyone who came to my sixtieth-birthday rave-let at the (sadly missed) Bossa Nova Civic Club, and especially to Cedric, for your kindness to this old queen.

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FIRST THING I LOOK FOR AT RAVES: who needs it, and among those who need it, who can handle their habit?

Sitting it out for a bit. In the yard, where it's cooler. These crip feet throbbing. I'm propped against—something, or someone. Delicious fatigue. Resting my feet. Drinking water. It's getting light. Contemplating whether to go home. Lost my crew—let's call them Z and E. Think they're still here, somewhere. It's all good. A moment alone, but not alone.

Looking over the crowd. In small groups, sitting, standing. I think I see B and H and maybe A. I like that it's mostly the crowd that needs it. I'm chemically predisposed to liking. Rolling on molly for a while now and am heading for the shoulder, where you roll off into the dirt.¹ Even in this irritating light these still seem like humans I want to be with. It's not always easy, being a middle-aged, clockable transsexual raver. Right now I'm in a situation where I'm neither shunned nor attracting attention.

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This situation began when I first glimpsed the poster. Not an actual poster. My friend Q sent it by DM. A tiny square of visual information. I put the date in my calendar and cleared the following day. It's for a New York queer rave that's run since 2015. Its posters suggest a certain pocket world of possibility. It'll be a rave, sure. The DJs will be great. Maybe there's a bit of a theme. You won't know where it'll be but can probably guess.

The artwork intimates something else as well. Each poster takes over and repurposes some other style. Which is sort of the whole deal. Take over space. Take over machines. Take over chemistry. Play from inside the signs, the tech, the real estate. At least for a bit. There's no outside anymore, but maybe we can find some fractal world on the inside. Now that's a good rave.

On a good night, everything at a good rave comes together with just the right tension of invention and intention. Everyone has a part in it. Some of it is work: There's W at the bar, serving a mate soda. There's N shouldering a monitor. There's S the promoter on his hustle, handing out drink tickets. Here's O with a big hug and a warm smile. But it's no fun for anyone if you just come to consume their labor.

Most of the New York queer and trans rave crowd gets this. Some come to serve looks; some come to leave their sweat on the dance floor. I'm the latter kind. I want to be animate and animated on the floor. A node in a rippling field of fleshy instances that tipple around the pulsing air.

That's what a good rave promises: Take in this situation. Add to it. Vary it. Update it, freshen it. Add an accent, a move, in time. The moment will pass on to the next no matter what you do. The rhythm machines exceed us. They're relentless.

They've displaced what was once called history. There's space between the beats, though, still to be.

Those beats are calling. I need to be back on the floor. I rested these crip feet enough to go back for more. I weave back through the topple of bodies splayed out in the yard. Back through the threshold. Where it's dark, hot, loud, a fog infused with trinket light. The beats invoke me. To this time inside the machine that we're all in, that goes on regardless, but within which here, in this lovingly crafted situation, art of many hands, we shall burn with animal fury, until it stops.

Dancing up close to DJ Goth Jafar. This girl next to me—let's call her F. I don't know what we are. Friends with benefits, maybe? Or maybe we're just occasional rave crew now. Anyway, tonight—she's on it. And it don't just mean a whole cap and stem. Pure motion, pure delight. She needs it. Sweat sheened. I go into rave mom mode. Not that she can't take care of herself. She saw combat, in a former life, in another gender. Touch her lightly on the shoulder. When she looks over, I mime and shout, "Water?" Check. I fetch.

Next to her is what my rave friend B calls a *punisher*, although as we shall see not the worst kind. He is someone who is going to make it hard to get your rave on, one way or another. He stands stock still in front of the DJ, checking his phone. Then he turns to his friend, another punisher. They have a loud conversation. Then he lifts up his beer can and sprays the contents on those around him. When I return with water, F has moved away from him.

Raves serve a lot of needs, interests, desires. For distraction, entertainment, exercise, dating, cruising, and so on. Those might be met by other practices just as well. I'm interested in a

specific set of needs and a particular range of people for whom the rave itself is the need.

Not interested in punishers. Even less in what H, another rave friend, calls *coworkers*: people who just want a night out so they can talk about it around the office on Monday. Having avoided the punishers, now we're stuck next to a coworker. He's into it, but a little too hard. Not that I'm judging; I know the feeling. But it makes it impossible to be dancing next to him. Hyperfast, erratic movements, throwing himself around, like he's the only one here. We move again.

I'm interested in people for whom raving is a collaborative practice that makes it possible to endure this life. There's a lot of metaphors I could throw at this: rave as addiction, ritual, performance, catharsis, sublimity, grace, resistance.² Let's not assume too much about it before we get there. Let's have some *concepts* of raving emerge out of some participation and observation.³ I'm going to take you raving.

My practice for writing about raving will be to describe some situations, in some messy, heterogenous detail, highlight some emerging concepts, and then wrap it all up with a distillation of those concepts before the beat stops, or rather, before the book ends.⁴

Call the first layer of writing style here autofiction, if you like.⁵ I'm in the writing. Hi! This is me. The stories here are fictions dancing around the facts. These things did not happen. The person to whom they did not happen is me.

Call the second layer autotheory, if you like.⁶ It's writing that needs to gather concepts from situations more than it needs to extract stories from them. These situations being raves.

What is a rave like? A jackhammer in a sauna. To rave, to rove, to *rêve* (dream).⁷ If it's called a rave, there's some expectations: It will go for a long time. That might need a little chemical assistance. There might be some socializing, some flirting, even some rave sex, but we're here to dance—to the point of exhaustion.

There's different kinds of raves. We'll be going to queer and trans-friendly raves in Brooklyn, New York. There's a few legal venues that the ravers I know favor, not always queer or trans, but where, depending on the night, we might be a flavor. Mostly, we will be in various venues of varying degrees of illegality, the location released only on the day.

The music will mostly be techno. Repetitive, four-to-the-floor beats, from about 120 to 140 per minute. Few if any vocals. Few sounds that bear any relation to any recognizable musical instrument. Some say techno came from Germany, but to me it's Black music. Which for a white girl like me comes as a gift, and one many of us use to other than original purposes. Within techno's surround of sounds and beats, there's been sonic situations for all kinds of temporary life, that of queer and trans people among them.⁸

DeForrest Brown Jr.: “Techno, as a historical artifact, derives its central premise from the act of African Americans dreaming of a future beyond the structural failings of a post-industrial collapse in the late twentieth century. Formulated out of a conceivably intuitive response to the urban degradation plaguing Detroit and other cities around the United States in the early 1980s, techno—rather than a generic component of a globalized music technology cartel and drug-induced night-

life economy—is evidence of post-civil rights era Black youth adapting to their exposure to consumer technologies in the industrialized Northern states. Detroit techno—a concept of sonic world-building and coded information exchange born out of a centuries-long lineage of African American struggle and insurrection—would eventually be exported, repackaged, and financialized within foreign markets to be assimilated into the British and European post-colonial drug and rave revolution—replicating the profit-oriented process of extraction.”⁹

The irony being that the situations created by those of us from the global queer drug rave world are also now sites of extraction.

In contemporary Brooklyn raves, we will often be in the company of other trans people, like me mostly white, although mostly much younger. Trans people are a small but curious subset of ravers, and I have theories as to why. We’ll come to that. At the rave, different kinds of ravers meet, and we’ll meet some of the other kinds. The point of view will be that of this middle-aged, middle-class, white transsexual dance freak.

It’s not my first rodeo. I came back to raving as a practice after a twenty-year chillout. There will be hazy memories of eighties and nineties raves, but I’m not interested in “back in the day.” This is a story about finding something elusive in the nowadays. Something I came back to and am learning with a certain naïveté—an openness to folly, to findings that come from getting lost.

I did get lost once. Mixing molly and ketamine and weed like an overeager coworker. Am at it hard; everything aches. Can’t find the exit to this sweet warren of a venue. Making a firm decision not to panic. Maunder the multiple rooms, the

yard, sampling moments, situations, until the doors open and we all tip out. Daylight prisms through sweat.

I can handle myself at raves. On an overlit floor, into a dazzling madison moore set, loving where they're taking my body. Strobes flash. On way too much psilocybin. Finding it hard to balance. Everything's squirming. Stop, sip water. Sidle around the edge of the dance floor, touching the wall. I don't see any of my crew of the night, but there's A and U. "How's your journey?" A brief chat, already grounding, then moving on.

There's a sofa two stories up metal stairs, next to the dark-room where the circuit gays fuck. Head for it. Nobody here. Lie down, do breathing exercises, come back to some fuzzy but habitable embodiment. Check I have my silver rave bag. Drink more water. Go check in with Z, with whom I took the shrooms, to see how her journey's going.

Drugs are a part of rave culture, but sober raving is also a thing. I take a break in the midmorning to go home and nap. Come back clean for the closing set. The room, a miasma of fog and sweat. Kip Davis, the lighting designer, bouncing colored strobes off the vaporous air itself, refractions zagging. A hand reaches out, and I see it's attached to R, looming over the gloam in her six-inch pleasers. I'd intended to hang back but turns out I need it: to slip and shimmy myself to the front of the room, lose all awareness of brain and body, and trip hard just on the situation.

It's tempting to romanticize such moments. Mostly it's just a grind, the body granulated into sound, light; selves loosening into others. It might take hours. The ravers I choose to be around, those who need it and can maintain, are patient. It isn't grace, but not unlike grace, it comes when it chooses, not when

you want. I don't know why I need this, but I need it. Others do too, maybe it hits the same way for them, maybe not.

Trans people are not the only ones who dissociate—but we tend to be good at it.¹⁰ We're a kind of people who need to not be in body or world. The body feels wrong. The world treats us as wrong. Dissociation can be debilitating. And also sometimes not. I used to write a lot, in dissociated states. Then I transitioned, and couldn't write at all. And yet still needed to dissociate. I felt better about being embodied, but the world didn't. So—raves. And out of raves, the writing came back, slowly.

I want to recover at least some kinds of dissociation from the language of psychiatrists. I want to find ways this disability can also be enabling.¹¹ A way to find out things about the world. So now I have two dissociated practices that I need to live: raving and writing. Raving got the writing going again. It's a challenge to bring them together. It's taking patience, and practice.

I mostly write theory, so it's tempting to start with theory. I can resist anything except temptation—but am tempted by nothing so much as an exception. Let me break out of the autofictional groove with a quick dip into theory texts, to acknowledge some gifts. Firstly, the concept—both more and less than a concept—of the *surround*. That under and around, that refuge, hacked out of thickening air, this other city, underlit, undergoverned.

Harney and Moten: “Having looked for politics in order to avoid it, we move next to each other, so we can be beside ourselves, because we like the nightlife which ain't no good life. We ask and we tell and we cast the spell that we are under, which tells us what to do and how we shall be moved, here,

where we dance the war of apposition. We're in a trance that's under and around us."¹²

Back in the summer of 2020, when a chunk of Brooklyn refused to acknowledge a police curfew and was on the streets for Black life, as Black life, a friend described it as a "Black rave." The rave, techno, nightlife, surround: they're all, among other things, gifts of blackness.

Harney and Moten: "But blackness still has work to do: to discover the re-routing encoded in the work of art: in the anachoreographic reset of a shoulder, in the quiet extremities that animate a range of social chromaticisms and especially, in the mutations that drive mute, labored, musicked speech. In those mutations that are always also a regendering or transgendering lies blackness, lies the black thing that cuts the regulative, governant force of (the) understanding."¹³

That the rave is one of several gifts of blackness, that's the first (and last) thing to say about it. A gift that already gestures toward transsexuality, even if it doesn't always feel (like) it.¹⁴

The second theory bit I want to borrow from is a different history of practices. Drawing on the writings of the situationists, let's think of a rave as a *constructed situation*.¹⁵ A situation is where agency meets concrete forms that shape its expression. A constructed situation brings a certain intention to how agency can express its willfulness, its need.

The rave situation is a temporary, artificial environment made by the combined labors of the promoter, DJs, lighting designers, sound engineers, hosts, and all those paid to make it happen. They construct a situation that confronts the ravers with a set of constraints and possibilities. The ravers bring their freedom: their moves, raw need, and their arts of copresence.

For the situationists, the constructed situation had a revolutionary potential, for what the form of life could be after the abolition of the commodity, the spectacle, the whole oppressive totality. I remember some of those intentions still being present in some eighties and nineties rave scenes.¹⁶ Today's raves are hardly a situation that prefigures utopia. They cannot prefigure futures when there may not be any. The constructed situation of the rave may be all some of us have—even if the revolution comes.

Morgan M. Page: "I've never been under the illusion that my kind will survive the revolution."¹⁷

Situation and story, two contrapuntal elements of prose writing.¹⁸ This text is mostly situations, but if you want a narrative, here's a grand one: History and capitalism were dating. History was seeing other people, so capitalism really tried to look like the best of all possible worlds. Then they got married, and capitalism stopped trying so hard. And then history said, "Remember my vow, 'til death do us part? Well, do you think I was kidding, or not?"

NOTES

1. Rave as Practice

- 1 On the rise and fall of the ecstasy-era raves, see Silcott, *Rave America*; Collin, *Altered State*; Reynolds, *Energy Flash*; and Collin, *Rave On*. Holman and Zawadzki, *Parties for the People*, has thoughtful documentation and recollection of a particular Northern English scene. There won't be a literature review as this is not that kind of book. Think of these end notes as that. Or as potential reading lists. Or as snapshots of my room at various stages in this work, with books and photocopies in piles around and even in the bed where I often work.
- 2 On urban subcultures and music, see Hebdige, *Subculture*; Chambers, *Urban Rhythms*; McKay, *Senseless Acts of Beauty*; Gilbert and Pearson, *Discographies*; St. John, *Technomad*; and Thornton, *Club Cultures*.
- 3 For me, the classic on participant observation is still Becker, *Outsiders*. See also Esther Newton's pioneering queer ethnography, *Mother Camp*. I always learn from my New School colleague Terry Williams. See his *Soft City*, although his and his students'

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encounters with trans nightlife might say more about cis people than us.

- 4 In terms of an operative sketch for a method, I've learned a lot from Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*; and Salamon, *Assuming a Body*. I'm influenced by Gayle Salamon's reading of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body, but in this book, I'm looking for limit cases, particularly of transsexual embodiment, raver embodiment, that might exceed these concepts.
- 5 For me, autofiction is a form of writing for those whom the bourgeois novel could accommodate only in the margins: those not straight, not white, not men, not cis. Those who can't hide behind the alibi of fiction as if their kind could be said to already exist, who have to write their world into existence through their own name. For instance, see Genet, *Our Lady of the Flowers*; Dustan, *Works of Guillaume Dustan*, vol. 1; and Lorde, *Zami*.
- 6 See Fournier, *Autotheory*. As with autofiction, there are a lot of possible genealogies for autotheory. I happen to like this feminist one. To which I'd add the early writing of Susan Stryker, such as "Dungeon Intimacies" and "LA by Night," and Paul Preciado's *Testo Junkie*.
- 7 In *Energy Flash*, Simon Reynolds thinks the use in London of the term *rave* for all-night parties may have West Indian roots. See Steve McQueen's *Lover's Rock*, a lovingly rendered film set mostly at a West Indian house party in London.
- 8 On queer uses of dance music, see Adayemi et al., *Queer Night-life*; Geffen, *Glitter Up*; Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*; Lawrence, *Life and Death*; Salkind, *Do You Remember House?*; Buckland, *Impossible Dance*; and Garcia, "Alternate History of Sexuality."
- 9 Brown Jr., *Assembling a Black Counter-culture*. This and most other block quotes, dropped in like samples, are edited and condensed. For DeForrest, techno is a specifically African American music, one of a series of forms that evolve out of the experience

- of slavery. Others follow Paul Gilroy in placing Black musical cultures in a diasporic perspective. See Gilroy, *Darker than Blue*. On blackness and dance music, see also Miller, *Rhythm Science*; Tate, *Flyboy 2*; Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun*; Brar, *Tek-life*; Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*; and Muggs, *Bass, Mids, Tops*.
- 10 Treating dissociation as aesthetic rather than pathological is a practice I've had help with from other trans writers. See Wallenhorst, "Like a Real Veil"; and Markbreiter, "Cruel Poptimism."
 - 11 On disability and raves, see Beery, "Crip Rave."
 - 12 Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*, 19. The undercommons is the best-known concept (if it is a concept) from that text, but I want to explore the surround instead. See also Moten, *In the Break*.
 - 13 Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*, 50
 - 14 On blackness, trans-ness, and sound, see Weheliye, *Phonographies* (where trans-ness is not all that well handled). On blackness and trans-ness, see Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*; Gossett, Stanley, and Burton, *Trap Door*; Bey, *Black Trans Feminism*; Stanley, *Atmospheres of Violence*; Stallings, *Funk the Erotic*; Moore, *Fabulous*; and von Reinhold, *LOTE*.
 - 15 Sadler, *Situationist City*; Koolhaas et al., *Constant*; and Prestsaeter, *These Are Situationist Times!*
 - 16 Situationist practices (perhaps more than theories) found their way into anarchist-inspired free rave movements. See, for example, Harrison, *Dreaming in Yellow*.
 - 17 Morgan Page, @morganmpage, on Twitter, February 14, 2020.
 - 18 Gornick, *Situation and Story*.

2. Xeno-euphoria

- 1 On thresholds and the in-between, see Eyck, *Child*.
- 2 The dolls, in their own words: Lady Chablis, *Hiding My Candy*;

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