The Morality of Losing Yourself on a Dance Floor: How a Rave Scene Delineates Belonging based on Intention

Eleanor Waite

Dalhousie University—eleanor.waite@dal.ca

ABSTRACT

When raving emerged in the early 1990s, it promoted a clear ethos: peace, love, unity and respect. Raving soon entered a decline when the parties became commercialized and governments took various measures to quell unlicensed events, losing their original ethos. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, Halifax, Nova Scotia, in Atlantic Canada, has experienced a rebirth: an emerging rave scene appears to be reconnecting to this original ethos, which many thought was dissolved when the unlicensed rave scene largely merged with the licensed, commercialized club scene in the 2000s. Following ethnographic research, participant observation and interviews with participants in this local, underground party scene, this paper traces how these events differentiate themselves from the commercial nightlife scene through a unique set of intentions, and how participants' attitudes, drug selection, and behaviour illustrate a choice to pursue these intentions. I introduce the concepts of "moral" and "immoral" ravers as models for understanding these differences, and ultimately argue that raving has anti-fascist potential in certain moments of collective forgetting on the dance floor, by allowing a momentary glimpse of a subjectivity outside dominant systems of power.

Keywords: raving, nightlife, leisure, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Atlantic Canada.

The individual is the product of power. What is needed is to "de-individualize" by means of multiplication and displacement, diverse combinations. The group must not be the organic bond uniting hierarchized individuals, but a constant generator of de-individualization.

– Foucault (1983)

Fieldnote: The Pre-Game

A *s I look around, outfits are being finalized, and decisions regarding transportation are being made, occasionally interrupted by a completely unrelated question from someone or another. The hostess is frantically trying to sort out details of the night's plan, running from room to room while trying to socialize, a nervous laugh giving away her tension. This is juxtaposed with people melting into sofas, deep smiles relaxing across their faces. I can't follow the number of conversations that are going on simultaneously. It's a small apartment in the North End of the city, and my group of four friends soon decides to leave; it's a 45-minute walk to the rave. We leave the chaotic mass in the living room and welcome the contrasting frigid winter air as we begin our walk.*

Raves emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s and were characterized as "grassroots organized, antiestablishment, unlicensed all-night dance parties, featuring electronically produced music (EDM)" (Anderson and Kavanaugh 2007, 500). These early raves defined their identity on an MDMA-induced ethos of "PLUR," which stands for "Peace, Love, Unity and Respect" (Hutson 2000; Reynolds 1999; Takahashi and Olaveson 2003). This ethos was, in some cases, viewed as an

approximation of an ideal society and suggested that raves should be unconditionally accepting spaces. Increasing commercialization of these parties, for example, licensed clubs hosting them or the emergence of mainstream, EDM mega-festivals, has led to the decline of this original PLUR ethos and the notion that rave is "over" or has merged with clubbing culture (Anderson 2009; Bennet 2001; Bennet and Peterson 2004; Bennett 1999; Malbon 1999; Thornton 1996). Many scholars now use the term "post-rave party" (St. John 2004a ; 2009) to demarcate events that follow similar physical and sonic forms to raves, but that are commercialized and no longer fit the bill for an 'authentic' rave. In this article, inspired by Tammy Anderson (2009), Graham St John (2004a; 2009) and Andy Bennet (2001), the commercialization of raves understands the rave as an anarchic party. While typically held in abandoned buildings, warehouses or outdoors, raves are increasingly brought under control by moving them to official, licensed or permitted night club venues or festival grounds. As such, they are subject to by-laws on nightlife and are no longer events that exist between or outside of the law. Commercialization often has the intentional side-effect of rendering an event accessible, advertised and pre-planned. Consequently, attendance numbers can increase, along with profits for both establishments and promoters.

Halifax had a thriving rave scene in the 90s, which went into decline in the early 2000s following commercialization and police crackdown efforts in reaction to race-related deaths (Weir 2000). After this decline, most EDM-centered events in Halifax took place at licensed establishments such as nightclubs. A raver and DJ in his early 40s, Caleb, described these bar and club events as "soulless," driven by financial motivations and often sacrificing the music and the culture in favour of alcohol and profit. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, however, Halifax's underground rave scene has seen a resurgence. Halifax once again has a consistent roster of grassroots dance parties, focusing on house and techno music, which emulate the raves of the 1990s (Anderson 2009). The promoters and creators of these raves, situating themselves on both the physical and cultural periphery of the mainstream

nightlife culture, appear to be motivated by musical culture rather than profit, creating a possibility for the PLUR ethos to return. It was to one of these raves that we were headed on this bitterly cold New Year's Eve. My research centers on these raves and the people who frequent them. I ask the question: what role do these events, which now exist in a completely different world from their predecessors, play for their attendees today?

Fieldnote: Temperature and Walking

For me, living in a city with deep, snowy winters, raving has always been deeply intertwined with temperature. Cold walks and hot dance floors, warm skin, sticky from sweat, emerging into a snowy parking lot. We are passing from residential into more industrial areas of the city. We bounce along, laughing at each other's jokes and at the excitement of welcoming a new year on the dance floor surrounded by music.

Scholars have shown how the history of raving in Canada differs from that of the UK or the USA, where most of the raving literature discussed in this paper is from (Takahashi and Olaveson 2003; Wilson 2002; Wilson 2006). Brian Wilson (2006, 19–20) notes that this different history may mean we need to conceptualize raves differently in Canada, where they emerged in different relationships to power and culture. The literature on Canadian raving is decidedly sparse and limited to the larger cities, such as Toronto (Wilson 2002; Wilson 2006), Montreal, and Ottawa (Olaveson 2004b; Takahashi and Olaveson 2003). This is a gap in the literature to which I mean to attend.

Fieldnote: Entering the venue

We pick up to a brisk walk as we see the small office building in the distance. Conscious of the time and wanting to be on the dance floor for the countdown into the new year, we begin, somewhat frantically, half-jogging. As we cross the parking lot, some friends from the pre-game exit an Uber and together we walk past the side of the building, glancing up at the single, rectangular window, a glowing beacon in the otherwise desolate parking lot.

We shimmy between air conditioning condenser units and a metal fence topped with barbed wire. The door is heavy metal; the group of us pushes in, showing our bags to the bouncer (a small man dressed in a security guard costume he bought on Amazon, according to the rumours). He barely looks at them and ushers us towards a man who is checking tickets. I begin to move through the empty hallway towards the countdown, towards the dance floor, towards the warmth that my numb ears and fingers are craving.

Ethnographic and interview methods have been widely used by researchers studying raving (Anderson 2009; Fritz 1999; Malbon 1999; Olaveson 2004a; St.John 2009; Takahashi and Olaveson 2003; Wilson 2006). In addition to attending this rave and five others, I conducted semi-structured interviews with ten participants, allowing me to better understand not only my own experience of raving but also other participants' experiences at raves. I interviewed "regular ravers," that is, anyone who self-identified as such and had attended more than one of the raves on which this project is focused. Four of my participants were also involved in the promotion and organization of raves. Recruitment for interviews was done through posts on the social media account of a rave organizer. Interviews focused on many topics surrounding the rave experience, for example, how the participant began raving, what keeps them coming back, and their experience on the dance floor. Ages ranged from early twenties to early forties. Two were women, seven were men, and one person was non-binary; four participants identified as part of the queer community. While the quotes used in this article come predominantly from these interviews, my findings are also informed by informal conversations I had during rave observations.

I used observation at raves as a method, following the experiential anthropology outlined by Melanie Takahashi and Tim Olaveson (2003), who argue it is crucial to understand what raves mean to their interlocutors. They argue this method is critical in part because the activity of raving is a highly embodied one; therefore, understanding raving cannot be done by merely speaking about it.

Scholars of raves understand that trying to comprehend it "vicariously" is ineffective (Fritz 1999, 199). My ethnographic methods can be further specified as sensory ethnography in that I sought "to know places in other people's worlds that are similar to how they are known by those people" (Pink 2015, 26). By raving myself, I pursued a clearer knowledge of "what [participants'] sensory and embodied experience involves" (Pink 2015, 26). Following the example set by Tammy Anderson (2009) in her long-term ethnographic study of raving, during observation at raves, I paid particular attention to the setting, the demographics and behaviors of those present.

I analyzed my data in NVIVO, using an inductive coding method, allowing themes to emerge from an in-depth reading of my transcripts and notes. These codes emerged when I reached a point where I was seeing similar things in all my interviews (Luker 2008). From there, I developed sub-codes and built my analysis from these, using a grounded theory approach (Bloor and Wood 2006). Since raves are often spaces where illicit drug use is present, and many attendees appreciate the anonymity that those spaces provide, I intentionally designed the research methods to protect interviewees from any potential harm. The interviews posed less risk since they were completely anonymized, and I did not collect names or identifiable information from participants, asking for verbal consent rather than written consent to this same end. Although illicit drug use came up in interviews, this focused on the experience of *being on* the drug, which is not illegal. I never raised drug use in the interviews; in each case, the participants brought it up independently.

Fieldnote: First Moments on the Dance Floor

My first moments on the dance floor feel chaotic. Immediately upon entering the room, I'm hot. The beat is taking me away, and I'm loving it, but I'm also slightly overwhelmed. The smoke and the lights make it hard to make out what's going on; these visual distortions of the physical space make me feel like I'm floating. The dance floor is full of people I know. I can't tell who they are until they're right in front of

me, due to the lights and the smoke. They all want hugs and to dance together for a few moments before disappearing back into the abyss of the dance floor. The music rings in my ears, creating a mental landscape for my experience. My body moves along the curves of the sound. The lack of clarity regarding my physical environment causes me to spend more time in my mental one. The environment is encouraging me to use specific senses more than others, to feel rather than to analyze, something I'm typically not very good at.

The smoke blurs my ability to pay attention to anything but my own physical and mental experience. Am I losing myself in it too much? I look around, but all I can make out are other silhouettes dancing as hard as I am. My skin is hot, the warmth of movement, and so many bodies in a room. With the shared heat giving me permission, I let go again. I'm likely sweating, but my skin feels light. The joyful collision of movement and sound in my own body is thrilling. I'm experiencing my body for what it is more than I ever knew possible. I feel like a vessel for the pounding beat and repetitive vocals. I feel them in my chest, in my heart, in my feet and in my head. The sonic saturation of the room, the way it's filled with sound, doesn't leave space for thought. For those brief moments of ecstasy, of physical replacing cerebral, I'm released from my constantly racing, analyzing mind and it's... Euphoric.

Many scholars have written on raves as resistance or at the very least, political participation (Bennet 2001; Bennet and Peterson 2004; Bennett 1999; 2002; Greener and Hollands, 2006). Most of them draw on Michel De Certeau (1984), who argues that popular culture, formed in resistance to power, is continually changing to avoid being engulfed by elites, but also that this resistance is rarely overt. A crucial element of de Certeau's (1984) thinking for following scholars is that place is critical to resistance, finding space "outside of the practices of domination" (Pile 1997, 15) is, in itself, resistance.

Angela McRobbie (1994) applied De Certeau's ideas to rave dance floors in Britain, looking at resistance as enacted through a mundane level of everyday practices. McRobbie (1994) notes,

for example, the explicit lack of an aggressive political agenda, such as those that could be seen in earlier punk subcultures. This lack of explicit political agenda in the rave scene has been criticized by some scholars (Thornton 1996) as proof of the rave scene's mindlessness and lack of meaning. However, McRobbie (1994,192) argued that we might "reinsert resistance at the more mundane, micrological level of everyday practices," ergo that the lack of a defined political agenda may not preclude raving as a form of resistance. Maria Pini (1997) posited raves as spaces where typical social norms and patterns are subverted, a notion other scholars support (Riley, Griffin, and Morey 2010; St. John 2004c; 2004b; St. John 2009). If raves are indeed a place of escaping dominant norms, they could well be deemed resistance. Resistance on a micro-scale, on the scale of the self, the everyday, and the mundane, seems justified, even to be encouraged, in the face of oppressive forces that worm their way into our own subjectivities. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987, 215) argue that fascism, as a desire for order, purity, hierarchy and sameness, can exist on the individual level just as it can exist on the state-level, claiming that "what makes fascism dangerous is its molecular or micropolitical power." They write that it is only too easy to be antifascist on a macro scale, "and not even see the fascist inside you." When we consider raving's potential for political resistance, it is on this scale that I imagine it, raving as a counter to the microfascisms present in one's own subjectivities. If microfascisms tempt the individuals' subjectivity towards order, purity and hierarchy, then perhaps raving might tug the individual subjectivities into chaos, difference and heterarchy.

Ben Malbon (1999), despite adopting De Certeau's ideas of resistance as possibly covert, rejects this dualism of power and resistance or less powerful vs. more powerful in his ethnography on clubbing. Malbon (1999) instead builds on Steve Pile's conceptions of power. In this theory, the resistance we are discussing is in relationship not only with traditional authority, but also with a different, non-conventional conception of power, one which sees power in experience, perhaps even elements of participants' own identities (Pile

1997). Michel Maffesoli's (1996) theory of neo-tribal sociality also provides an important base for Malbon's thinking. Maffesoli's (1996) theory posits how social identities have changed in our post-modern reality: whereas previously people identified with larger meta-identities such as nationality, occupation and gender, these are rapidly losing sway as a basis upon which to build a social identity. "We are now far, to be sure, from the unity that has been, from the dawn of modernity, the goal of Western rationalism" (1996,105), writes Maffesoli, explaining that we are now dispersed into micro-groups he calls "neo-tribes," which are significantly more fluid than the traditional notion of a tribe. Maffesoli writes that "any unified entity is temporary" (1996, 105), referring to the futility of coercing people into groups and definitions intended to be permanent. The notion of a neotribe refers more to a temporarily unified group of people. This temporary unity of a neo-tribe is achieved by collective rituals and mutual affect. Here, we can understand the Dionysian Principle to be at play. The 'Dionysian Principle' posits that ecstatic, communal celebrations create a quasi-sacred aura around the temporary neo-tribe (Maffesoli 1996; Gardiner 1997). The energy, micro-power and vitality that this experience brings forth are referred to by Maffesoli (1996) as *puissance*, and it is from this notion of *puissance* that Malbon's (1999) more specific and applicable concept of *playful vitality* emerges.

Malbon's (1999) notion of *playful vitality* combines the celebration of the joy that collectivity can create with a temporary disruption of the everyday. The clubbers that Malbon studied construct alternative imagined worlds around themselves on their nights out, within which they might experience this playful vitality. He posits that playful vitality is not resistance in the conventional understanding of it, because it is not resisting a dominant culture (1999, 164). The prescribed aim of a particular future is not a prerequisite for Malbon to imagine playful vitality as resistance, and as such, we can place his perceptions of resistance in line with thinkers such as Angela McRobbie and Maria Pini.

Others have followed similar lines of thinking to Malbon, but conclude that these world imaginings are a group experience, a potential group utopian imagining. Graham St. John (2004c, 24; 40) describes the "rave imaginary" as discourses of consciousness expansion and metamorphosis, which take place in the (hetero) utopian space that St. John (2004c) conceptualized the rave to be, describing this as "catalyzing new self and social fictions." That is, raves can be seen as a "difference engine," enticing the imagining of alternatives to current hegemonic structures and discourses (St. John 2004c).

Wilson (2002; 2006) draws from Malbon and Maffesoli to investigate the political potential of rave, specifically in the Canadian context. Through his ethnographic work on raves in Toronto, he concluded raves weren't political, noting that they don't have a social change agenda. This contrasted Greener and Hollands' work around the same time. Through a qualitative survey of "psy-trance" (a subgenre of electronic dance music) enthusiasts, they concluded that living the lifestyle surrounding psy-trance has a social change agenda, the lifestyle itself being a potential tool for social change (2006).

Leaning heavily on Maffesoli's theory, Riley, Griffin and Morey argue that Wilson's insufficient application of the theory of neo-tribal sociality is why he concludes that raving cannot be seen as political (2010). They contest the idea that having a political change agenda is a critical element of political participation, drawing on scholars who have argued for leisure as political participation (Giddens, 1964, 1991; Harris, 2001; Harris et al., 2001). Through a two-year study on social and political identities related to electronic dance music, they argue that by engaging directly with institutions of power, we run into the problem of not only validating the existence of such institutions but also ordering ourselves into a subordinate position to them (Harris, 2001, quoted in Riley et al., 2010, 347). A solution that they propose to this problem is to "create one's own spaces in which to live out alternative values, shifting political participation to the 'everyday' individual or informal group level" (Riley et al., 2010, 347). We can hear the echoes of De Certeau (1984), McRobbie (1993, 1994), Malbon (1999) and St.John (2004c) in this assertion. It is along these lines that leisure and raving are argued to become political participation, through existence outside of the dominant systems of power.

Those moments on the dance floor in which I can lose myself are the ways in which dancing at a rave can be resistance. The moments in which my mind is able to forget what I need to be pursuing in life, forget the drive to economic stability, academic achievement, performing a role in society that was written by a capitalist ethos, forget it all and be focussed on the experience in that very moment, surrounded by people who are flickering in and out of those moments of forgetting in the same way I am. It's the experience of true presence. It is the magic of that one moment when we all flicker into forgetfulness at precisely the same second, perhaps we only align for a sub-perceptual amount of time, over almost before it begins. That moment is true existence outside a dominant system of power. A moment in which I, as a molecule, the micro, can be free from the pressures of the macro. In which the microfascisms within me, of which I am not even aware, can be rewritten. Losing oneself in that moment is like a fresh snow on a ski slope, erasing the imprints of society, those seeds of oppression, on my mind. Freeing my mind to momentarily be free of those shackles. That is what I am experiencing now, on this dance floor. As the beat pulses and the sweat drips, my eyes close. Sound washing over me in pulsing waves of base. This resistance is personal, it is embodied, and it relies on the altered subjectivity that this environment invites.

The people I interviewed seem to have these experiences as well. This connection through simultaneous presence was described directly by two of my interviewees: "It allows me to feel free and like nothing else is going on. I have a very scatter-brained brain, but when I'm there, like nothing else matters. Except for the art that I'm experiencing and the connection that I have with the other people there," followed later in the interview by "I feel at one with myself, and I feel I'm in the moment where so many times if I would go to another place, like go to another

club, I would be thinking about everybody around me. I'm thinking about [hookups and drinking], but [at the raves] it's not about that, it's about being, it's about like feeling literally connected with the spiritual aspect, the high energy. That really is on everyone else and feeling connected to that" (Quinn), and "It frees up your mind to fully experience what you're doing rather than thinking about the next thing" (Nyx). Study participants had experiences dancing that were comparable to my own. Whether you understand it as Maffesoli's puissance, Malbon's playful vitality or even Durkheim's collective effervescence, it's the same moment, the same jolt of collective energy and has the same subversive potential. A fleeting moment of existence outside the dominant system of power, never to be found in the exact same way again. That's what you can find on a rave dance floor, what keeps bringing people back. The *potential* for those moments. And at the same time, as there is a euphoria in those moments, there's also an important concurrent subversion of capitalism.

Figure 1: "It is the magic of that one moment when we all flicker into forgetfulness at precisely the same second." Image by @disposableravers, Copyright 2024.

Fieldnote: Hallway

The dance floor was getting overwhelming, so I retreated for a water break and to the hallway. I stand by the coat stand, catching my breath. People pass me, smiling, grabbing coats for a smoke break or rubbing my shoulder and checking if I'm okay. I smile and let them know I'm just catching my breath. They smile back knowingly; they've been experiencing a similar euphoria on the dance floor.

I lean against the wall for a few moments and watch the different people pass by. Some in black pants and black hoodies, some in incredibly flamboyant or extremely risqué rave outfits, some in wigs and some in scissor-cropped shirts. No outfit is too wild or too basic; it all just is. Some people in hoodies and jeans compliment my outfit (a red mesh ensemble that allows some temperature control on the dance floor) as they walk by, and I offer them a genuine smile.

Standing by the door, my attention falls on the coat rack. It's nothing more than a few metal clothing racks, placed in the hall right before the door to the dance floor. Unlike the downtown venues, which turn a profit by charging for coat check, this system (or perhaps lack thereof) allows ravers a freedom of movement that a coat check inhibits. People can come and grab their coats to spend more time outside, whether that be for smoking, socializing or just taking a break from the music and dancing. They don't need to interact with anyone or wait in line. This facilitates freedom of movement and allows for more connection between people, warm coats allowing them to spend more time outside in the cold, where conversations are easier in the absence of deafening music.

This is all possible due to the organizers of the events prioritizing the experience, the music and the culture over making a profit for themselves, not caring to charge for coat check. Every event organizer I spoke to over the course of my research reiterated to me that their goal is simply to break even when they plan these events (Caleb, Blaine, David). In other words, they are prioritizing facilitating the connection of the participants (both to the music and to each other) over profit. Another example of existing outside dominant structures of power.

The culture of collective care at raves was touched on by all of my participants. The idea that "people are extra caring for one another at raves more than just a normal show" (Julie, raver in her late 20s) is widespread throughout the Halifax rave community. Nine of my participants explicitly noted how people at raves are more likely to stop and help someone "having a bad time" at a rave. Blaine spoke at length about how his events have been set up

to create feelings of collectivity. The goal isn't that the DJ is the centre of attention. Instead, he wants dancers' attention to be on each other and the collective they create.

> I think that's kind of what separates [Halifax's] underground raves from more commercial and mainstream stuff. [Downtown] you'll see a DJ on a big stage at some events, and you know, it's almost like all the attention has to be on them. I really don't think that that matters, like at all.

In contrast to these big commercial events, which are almost more like concerts, in that the crowd is facing the DJ and watching the whole time, Blaine is a fan of a more "minimalist" setup. Some coloured lights, a disco ball, and the DJ booth on the same level as the dancers, so that they can focus on each other rather than on a show at the front of the room.

Blaine's efforts to create a more collective experience have not been in vain. Caleb said about the raves, "I would say that that room, its music is the first most important thing there. I would say to most people. And then community would be the second most important thing to most people that are there." This is an element that distinguishes Halifax's underground raves from commercial and downtown events: culture and music are paramount. In comparison to the financial motivations behind commercial events, these grass-roots raves are motivated by a love and respect for EDM music and culture. Caleb told me, "All of us are doing the work to do these shows from a place of music. Like just a, like a cultural place. If we don't lose money, that's good, but nobody's trying to make it like their main job, I guess."

This distinguishes these events clearly from larger commercialized events. Clearly, the motivations of the promoters and the DJs impact the experience of the dancers and the culture of the scene. This can be seen in elements as small as the coat rack or accessibility of water, to larger elements such as the positioning of the DJ on the dance floor. Another key element of Halifax's underground rave culture, for those I interviewed at least, is its accepting nature. Quinn is a queer man who

has experienced discrimination when attending events downtown. Consider his comment:

> For the first time, I felt I was in the space where I was accepted, and I didn't have to be concerned about discrimination. I wasn't hearing about judgement [...] and I felt like everyone else cared about each other like everyone else around you. Like we all sort of... we're here for each other. Like we all have had this sort of collective idea and understanding that this is a safe space.

This awareness of the acceptance and welcoming nature of the underground rave scene was echoed by all my participants. All identities are welcome, and the culture that exists is one of care: caring for one another and for yourself. This acceptance is also exceptional when compared to downtown nightlife, which several noted was often punctuated by discriminatory bouncers or spaces that felt unsafe for queer folks.

Halifax's underground rave scene was actively created by several people who sought to find an alternative to the dominant downtown clubbing culture and large-scale, commercialized EDM events. This creation was inherently political, crafting a music-centric scene where an ethos of collectivity and acceptance was encouraged by promoters who prioritized culture over profit. In the following section, I will analyze how this culture was maintained by ravers who valued this ethos.

Figure 2: "This creation was inherently political, crafting a music-centric scene where an ethos of collectivity and acceptance was encouraged by promoters who prioritized culture over profit." Image by Brody Reid, Copyright 2024.

Fieldnote: By the Barbed Wire

A group of us are standing around outside the door by the barbed wire fence. Some of us smoking and some of us simply there for the fresh air. My friends' eyes are glowing, bodies still warm from the dance floor and excited for the rest of the night. "It's only 1:30," one of them giggles. "We have, like, four more hours of this!" I look around at the other groups taking smoke breaks around us. There are some who are holding each other, resting heads on each other's shoulders. Friends hugging and standing close to one another. Interactions between strangers are mostly ones of warmth. Complimenting someone's energy on the dance floor here, checking in on someone there.

I take a second to think about what makes this different. I think back to some of the scenes I have seen standing outside bars downtown. The safety that I feel here is markedly different from a bar-front moment, punctuated by the occasional drunk man approaching me in an unwanted way or some pair getting into an alcohol-fueled fistfight.

Throughout my research, the topic of drug selection and its impact on the culture of an event repeatedly came up for my participants and in my observations. Four of my participants explicitly devalued cocaine as a rave drug. This might come as a surprise to those who view raves as spaces of purely hedonistic drug consumption, but the sentiment is logical when placed within the wider ethos of contributing to the collective, combined with a knowledge of the outcomes of taking different drugs. Consider Sam's opinions on using cocaine at raves, "Coke makes you completely un-empathetic. And you can't think about another person's experience if you're on coke because you're just […] in a world where no one else exists, and other people's experiences are so, like, inferior to yours."

Cocaine and those who take it were not considered to be in line with the values and ethos of the community. Rather, drugs such as "Molly" (MDMA) were more highly valued because of their ability to make their consumers more likely to contribute to the collective. After explaining how alcohol makes people more aggressive, Peter used MDMA as an example of the kind of substance that fits

better at a rave, "And the effects that it has on you are very different from alcohol and usually in a much more positive way. I've never known anyone who beat the shit out of anybody when they were high on M. I don't think it's ever happened… at least not on my watch."

There appeared to be a hierarchy of acceptability of drugs based on how much they would make the user feel connected to the collective. MDMA and psilocybin (magic mushrooms) usually topped the hierarchy, their effects being such that they allow users to feel a general empathy and connection. Alcohol and cocaine were the most dismissed by my participants as not eliciting the "correct" behaviour or mindset for raves. Indeed, Weir (2000) and Weber (1999) both similarly found that alcohol use at Canadian raves is low, generally because of the aggression it can create.

In the case of the Halifax underground rave scene, we can place this hierarchy of substances within the context of my participants valuing an intention to contribute to the collective over an intention to privilege the self.

Fieldnote: Back on the Dance Floor

The music seems to be getting better and better. The smoke has died down a bit, and the dance floor has become more social. Acquaintances from earlier in the night are meeting my eyes, and we knowingly share a few beats of the music together, nodding in time or making a face to communicate that we like what we're hearing. We don't even know each other's names, but we shake our shoulders and bounce around in a momentary harmony of intention, lacking any intention of a sexual future.

The ravers I spoke with agreed that sexual conquest was not a part of rave culture in the same way it is in other nightlife scenes. People whose intentions were sexual in any way were disparaged as having "the wrong intentions." This ranged from those committing sexual assault to those simply trying to 'find someone to go home with,' "Like, you definitely see people are out there just to hook up or whatever. And it's like, I've got nothing against

wanting to hook up. It's just to me, that's not really what the rave scene is about. Like it's not about like ogling people on the dance floor." Eight out of the ten participants independently brought up a lack of courting culture in the rave scene. Noting that while such behaviour wasn't entirely absent at raves, they didn't view people with those intentions as there for the right reasons, implicitly creating a moral judgement that this behaviour was wrong at raves.

Fieldnote: Hallway

I'm sitting cross-legged, leaning against the wall between the two bathrooms. My back is sore, and I think my dancing hours are over. I sit there feeling the wall support me, and the distant reverberations of the beat arrive on my spine. Someone I've been seeing around the rave but not spoken to sits next to me. I noticed him earlier, seemingly a little too high on something. We strike up a conversation, and it flows easily. I'm grateful that there's no intention from his side that I have to guard against. We're just two exhausted people who have had an intense night of dancing and whose energy is fading, chatting about how great it was. There's something that we share, just from having been at this event. We share that silent knowledge of how special it can be to offer up your essence to sound, to give up your body to vibrations flitting through the air.

I see my friends walking towards me, energy still high, but a few of them beginning to wind down. We rest for a bit before looking around at each other. "One more push, and then we go?" someone throws out. "One more push," we all agree, and head back to the dance floor.

Fieldnote: Downtown Event

I am at a large, commercialized EDM event in Halifax. To get in, we lined up for 15 minutes, had our bags checked, bought $80 tickets, and walked past seven police officers who were at the ready. We tried to find water and discovered that, unlike at the underground events in Halifax, you must buy bottled water. The stage is large, looming over the crowd, affecting how the crowd moves. Instead of focusing on one another, bouncing energy off each other and building a sense of collectivity,

dancers focus on the bright, shining screens that surround the DJ booth and the two dance performers who flank it. I have barely been there 10 minutes, and already a stranger has attempted to molest me. The music is interesting, but very different from the music I heard during my fieldwork. Rap songs and popular music are colliding with house beats; not entirely unappealing, but not the subtle EDM I became accustomed to during my fieldwork.

The most interesting thing is the people. Groups of white men with snap-back caps, white t-shirts and Bud Lights in hand, stand on the dance floor and watch the DJ, barely moving. People I recognize from the rave scene don crazy outfits and outlandish makeup. Others are in sundresses, while still others are in club-style mini-dresses. The difference feels jarring. I stand in the middle of the dance floor and dance as I have at countless raves, allowing the music to control my body. After a few minutes, however, I notice I am the only one in the vicinity doing so. I leave the dance floor to walk around. There is a discordance at this event. So many people with different intentions that they all seem to collide. The ravers dance hard at the front, trying to build energy with one another while being distracted by the dystopian screens in front of them. Boys trying to be men drink themselves silly and become menaces. People who love to dance drop acid and immediately become overwhelmed. People who love to love drop Molly and disappear into each other.

Some friends come over to join me and lament about the number of predatory men on the dance floor, the lack of collective joy, and the increasingly bad music. One of them moans, "I hate dancing when I have to push a guy off me every two minutes." I decide it is time for me to leave. On my way out, I run into a couple I have seen at countless raves but never spoken to. After introductions, I asked them what they thought about the event. "Makes me grateful for our little rave community, to be honest."

Only a few months after my fieldwork did I viscerally understand why my participants had made implicit moral judgements about ravers with the so-called "wrong intentions." The event

described above was a large part of it. Going into my fieldwork, I was aware that in previous anthropological works on raving, attention has been paid to "insiders" and "outsiders" of a particular scene. Based on her long-term ethnographic study of rave culture in Philadelphia, Tammy Anderson (2009, 51) offers a typology of "modern-day party people" in which she outlines six groups, divided into either an "insider" category or an "outsider" category. In general, all the types within the "insider" category were deeply committed to music and the unique collective identity of the scene. Insiders were also more likely to be clear about the separation between their scene and more commercialized events at clubs or bars (Anderson, 2009). On the other hand, types within the outsider category were less likely to view the raves they attended as part of a specific cultural entity and were generally not especially committed to EDM music. Outsiders are less likely to experience the feelings of collective solidarity that raving can illicit for insiders and are more likely to engage in common club activities such as heavy drinking and sexual conquest (Anderson 2009).

McKenzie Wark (2023, 91-93) recently presents a different typology: "raver," "co-workers," and "punishers." For all intents and purposes, a "raver" is considered an insider who has some deeper need to engage in the practice of raving and the whole emotional experience that entails. While "co-workers" enjoy the experience, they do not *need* it in the same way and are likely to use the experience to gain some form of social capital amongst their peers. Finally, Wark's (2023) "punisher" is someone who exploits the scene for their own enjoyment, not contributing to the collective in any way.

An immediate typology of this complexity was not evident in my fieldwork observations. All participants interviewed in this study referred to raves as spaces of acceptance, modelled after the PLUR-ethos. Interviewees described the rave scene in Halifax as "free of any sort of judgement" (Blaine), "a place to just be free and be a freak [...] a safe haven" (Caleb), or "a radically inclusive environment" (Julie), "a place for your expression and acceptance" (Peter). They cited this acceptance as one of the core reasons they engaged with the rave scene. Despite this acceptance, however, there were ways that my participants delineated what was acceptable and what was not. This section focuses on the disconnect between the participants' belief that the rave scene is a completely accepting space and the specific intentions or behaviours that were deemed unacceptable. As I will argue further below, these judgements served to protect from suffering a similar fate to the raves of the 90s, which were commercialized, made mainstream and subsequently lost their unique culture, to protect the scene from co-optation.

This distinction between those who engage in acceptable practices and intentions at raves (moral ravers) and those who do not (immoral ravers) was made implicitly by the people I interviewed. When this theme emerged in the data, my first instinct was that interviewees were indirectly defining the basis for community membership, implying that those who engaged in the practices of an immoral raver were not part of the rave community. However, none of my participants sought to actively exclude those who engaged in these practices. Indeed, in the field, I did not observe anyone policing any of the behaviours that were deemed unacceptable. People who engaged in the practices of the immoral raver appeared not to be ostracized from the rave community or actively made unwelcome at raves, despite participants making clear moral judgements in our interviews. I offer the types below to help us understand the complex webs of morality that my participants understood to surround the practice of raving. Max Weber (2012, 265) wrote that ideal types as analytical tools in the social sciences" are neither empirical reality, nor reproductions of empirical reality, but [...] allow empirical reality to be ordered intellectually." That is to say, there would likely not be a completely "moral raver" or a completely "immoral raver;" these are merely ideal types that help us understand the morality at work more broadly.

Moral ravers were defined by an accepting attitude, an intention to contribute to the collective experience and their main motivation for attending the rave being a deep enjoyment of dancing and listening to EDM music. This was

reflected in practices such as choosing drugs which increased empathy, caring for other ravers, prioritizing dancing over any kind of "hook up," and generally seeking to contribute to the energy of the collective. Immoral ravers' intentions were implied to be more self-centred. Not recognizing the need to contribute to the collective experience, and prioritizing their own experience over that of others, feeding their ego. In general, their intention in attending was seen to be personal gain, whether that be a sexual partner or status. Observing this in the field was more difficult. Theoretically, based on study participants' comments, the intentions of an immoral raver could be observed based on factors such as selecting drugs that boosted the ego and centrality of the self, not showing care for other ravers or actively pursuing someone on the dance floor instead of submitting oneself to the music. But in my observations, these practices were not unobservable at raves, even by those who would otherwise be deemed completely moral ravers.

The key distinction here, though, is not in behaviour but *in intention*. No one at a rave would deem someone ill-intentioned simply because they are choosing cocaine over MDMA or end up finding a romantic connection at a rave. Concrete *actions, characteristics,* or *identities* were not, in isolation, what would deem someone a moral or immoral raver; rather, it was the *intention* they had in attending the event. This perhaps explains my difficulty in observing this framework in action during my fieldwork. This distinction made on intention and not on any one observable characteristic is summarized well by Blaine:

> I don't think it's more so the right type of person, I think it's more of amindset or just like a person has to bekind of accepting of others and non-judgmental. I think you can run into people who might at first glance you might be like, "Oh, this guy is like a gym bro" or something, or you know, this other person looks super alternative […] but if they bring the same thing to the table mentally and their vibe you know, I think that's the most important thing.

People who rave to appreciate the music, dance, and connect with a collective, while accepting all types of identities, were considered moral ravers. On the contrary, those who were there for personal gain, for sexual conquest, or for the inflation of their own ego were immoral ravers. And yet, due to this distinction being based on mostly invisible elements such as intention and acceptance of others, an immoral raver is not ostracized from the rave community. Raves are still inclusive because anyone can, in theory, adopt and maintain the 'right' intentions.

This finding echoes Anderson's (2009) typology of 'outsiders' to the rave community. The common thread between her types is the intention behind them, each type relating differently to ideas of loyalty, social status, and more commercial club scenes. While Wark's (2023) "punisher" seems the most similar to my participants' idea of an immoral raver as someone who "treats the space as a spectacle for their entertainment, contributes nothing," my experiences in the field led me to believe that my participants' perceptions of rave-insiders and outsiders deviated from the clear-cut typology put forward by both Anderson (2009) and Wark (2023). My participants did not deem anyone participating in these practices as an outsider of the scene per se, merely labelled them as having the "wrong intentions" (Sam).

A mutual focus of attention is a key factor contributing to the creation of collective effervescence (Collins 2004). Perhaps this is why the morality of ravers was so present in my interviews. The more ravers are present with similar intentions and ideas of morality, the more likely collective effervescence is to emerge. Indeed, Sebastian Tutenges (2023) explicitly states that collective effervescence can be exclusive, accessible only to a distinct in-group. While my participants do not actively exclude those who engage in perceived immoral raving practices in any way, they may think them as less likely to have access to the experience of collective effervescence analyzed in my forthcoming work.

The event I attended in July 2024 is an example of what rave culture becomes when the process of commercialization is uninhibited. Events more accessible to the mainstream, that

is, both physically through location and in terms of musical content being aimed at a popular audience, naturally attract people unversed in the subtle courtesies that rave culture welcomes. The trend towards events such as this is what some scholars call "the decline" of the rave scene (Anderson 2009; St John 2009). Despite often being marketed as raves, these large-scale events rarely display the cultural dynamics and expectations of an "authentic rave." This hyper-commercialized, club-like event was an example of what the new underground rave scene in Halifax was created to provide an alternative to.

Deleuze and Guattari (1983, 29) see *everything* as a continual process of flows of desire; "There is only desire and the social and nothing else." Capitalism is a machine that orders these flows, and should a flow begin to exist outside of it (deterritorialization), it will reshape itself so that this *line of flight* once again exists within its grasp (reterritorialization). It is a process through which a spontaneous, uncontrolled flow of desire, underground raves, is brought under control and then made available for consumption, commercialized raves. The origin of raves in the 1980s was a form of covert resistance, an indirect resistance simply by means of existing outside the grasp of commercialization, institutions, and regulation. With their unpredictable locations and illegality motivated literally by the desire to dance and connect over a specific kind of music, the original raves were a line of flight. As raves were commercialized, policed, and turned mainstream — the decline of the "authentic" rave — the desire that led to this existence outside the reach of domination by social institutions and capitalism ultimately became commodified and engulfed by capitalism. Having been engulfed by capitalism, attendees were now led to seek the joy of the rave through consumption rather than affect.

Dissatisfied with this, Halifax's rebirth of underground raves was initiated by those desiring a new, rejuvenated form of the original line of flight. Having observed the rave's co-optation, interviewees were guarding against a repetition of this co-optation by subtly defining the acceptable and unacceptable. To protect from co-optation, ravers deemed those who bring the mainstream (egotistic, sexually motivated, judgmental, and lacking acceptance towards difference) too close to their precious cultural moment as *having the wrong intentions*. The subtle hint that "that's not really what the rave scene is about" (Noah) is an active resistance to capitalist co-optation.

Despite this resistance to protect the culture and experience of the raves, it is important to note that they are not utopian spaces. Despite the lack of a pervasive hook-up culture at the raves, some still cross boundaries without consent, as I have unfortunately observed during my fieldwork. Just because the rave scene's goals and intentions differ from those of the commercialized scene does not mean it is devoid of problems, such as racism and sexual assault (Palamar and Griffin 2020; Saldanha 2007). Further research on the Halifax rave scene could therefore focus on the lived reality of moral and immoral ravers and whether this intention-dependent acceptance extends along any boundaries of inequality. Are all skin colours and cultural backgrounds equally welcomed in the scene? Further, does this conceptual differentiation between moral and immoral ravers have any sway in attendees' behaviour at raves? I did not observe anyone directly telling someone that what they were doing was unacceptable, so how exactly is this theoretical distinction lived or communicated to those who may be immoral ravers? How is this concept enacted and this guarding against co-optation physically lived out, both at raves and beyond? Is the judgement of other ravers another way that microfascisms have wormed their way into our psyches? If the euphoria of a rave can allow momentary release from oppressive forces, a temporary deconstruction of microfascisms, what is the relationship between that moment and the delineation of morality in that space, which some might argue is that same inner drive towards order that is the micro seed of fascism?

This study is limited in that, by chance, half of my interviews were with people involved in the organization of the raves. This meant that my perspective on rave culture was necessarily one closer to what the organizers were specifically trying to elicit; that is, their own idea of what they were creating. Despite this, the other interviewees confirmed that the

organizers' philosophy and ideals were achieved in their experiences; more research focused solely on participants would be required to see how the ideals described in this article are lived by attendees. Undoubtedly, Halifax's new rave scene is something special. Whether it is in the intentional nature of its revival or the aligned intentions of its ravers, it deserves to be seen and understood as something unique within raving history, both in Halifax and beyond. Working on this article in late January 2025, after Trump's inauguration for a second term and the various changes put in place in the weeks following, many of us are considering how the current trend towards fascism might be meaningfully disrupted. While raving is not going to do the work of protesting or actively fighting fascism globally, it is still seen as a threat to far-right regimes. Giorgia Meloni, the new prime minister of Italy and descendant of the fascist leader Mussolini, proved this beyond doubt when the first decree-law she put into place upon entering office outlawed raving in Italy (Musacchio Strigone 2022). Foucault, in his preface to a 1983 translation of Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, affectionately dubbed the book "An Introduction to the Non-Fascist Life." Considering that the relationship between raving and power can be so well tracked with the ideas put forward in Anti-Oedipus, it is fair to say that raving can offer us, at the very least, a moment of non-fascist living.

Author's Note

Since writing this thesis in 2024, I have had the pleasure of seeing its findings in a new context. In light of this, I would like to point out some contradictions in the article. Above I propose that a moment of anti-fascist resistance is possible on the dance floor, but in the same article I observe that ravers distinguished between correct intentions and incorrect intentions, that they thought certain intentions belonged at a rave and certain intentions did not. Whereas Deleuze and Guattari (1987), upon whose work I base my anti-fascist argument, note that a desire for sameness or purity of any kind—on any scale—is an example of a micro-fascism, I hope that readers can see the contradiction that I did not at the time of writing the article. I would direct readers to Arun Saldanha's *Psychedelic White* (2007) for an exceptionally well argued and accessible example of this reasoning in a rave context, and encourage anyone interested to email me for further discussion.

Acknowledgements

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