REVIEW


Kyle Rogers
New York University, New York City, USA

McKenzie Wark’s 2023 book *Raving* is the latest edition in Duke University Press’s Practices series (edited by Margret Grebowicz), whose books “are for real-life hobbyists, devotees, and enthusiasts. They are by and about amateurs in the original sense — those who engage in pursuits out of sheer love and fascination.” Wark takes the reader into New York’s underground techno scene in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, a large and interconnected series of parties with varying degrees of legality that cradle the physical, sexual, and otherwise hedonistic urges of its queer and trans participants. Vacillating between first-person narrative, autotheory, and histories of urbanity in the postindustrial developed world, *Raving* adapts different forms of writing in order to represent a subculture whose personal, urban, and musical histories intersect in the thick of a dark, foggy warehouse.

I should note that I too am a participant in this scene, having been engrossed in queer nightlife in Brooklyn since I moved here eleven years ago as a dancer, organizer, and DJ. I have watched the scene move farther away from the shores of the East River over the past decade into the outer reaches of Bushwick, Ridgewood, and Maspeth as gentrification swept North Brooklyn. I do not know Wark personally, but we have many mutual friends in the scene, and I have deduced that many of the events she describes in *Raving* I also attended. I was also present for Wark’s reading of an excerpt of *Raving* prior to its release at Geoffrey Mac and Zoë Beery’s “Writing on Raving” event at Nowadays in Ridgewood, (a fantastic series worth attending) and can attest both to the excitement for the book’s release and to Wark’s deep involvement in the queer and trans dance music community. At a moment when DIY venues are becoming more scarce in favor of legal venues thanks to rising commercial real estate costs, when younger, poorer people are increasingly unable to move to or stay in the city anymore, and when many of our club nights are advertised to tourists on TikTok, I can personally corroborate that a meaningful exploration of the personal, urban, and economic narratives that govern this era of New York nightlife is a difficult yet necessary endeavor.

*Raving* sits at the nexus of two trends in contemporary writing practices. The first consists of works that seek to make theoretical interventions in nightlife and dance music scenes, including DeForest Brown Jr.’s *Assembling a Black Counter-culture* (2022), Dhanveer Singh Brar’s *Teklife, Ghettoville, Eski* (2021), and madison moore’s *Fabulous: The Rise of the Beautiful Eccentric* (2018). These works take a detailed, ethnographic approach to dance music and nightlife scenes past and present, synthesizing musical and/or performance analysis with critical interventions in radical black and queer theoretical canons. The second is a growing canon by highly educated trans women writers working in narrative (auto)fiction and poetry, such as Torrey Peters’s *Detransition, Baby* (2021), Casey Plett’s *A Dream of a Woman* (2021), and Kay Gabriel’s *A Queen*.
These works use personal narratives and (auto)biography to reveal implicit political dynamics within contemporary North American trans life that blur lines between narrative (non)fiction and social commentary. *Raving* attempts to synthesize these burgeoning trends by using the lived experience of a first-person narrative to draw theoretical conclusions about nightlife, dance music, and urbanity, examining how the individual participant interfaces with these increasingly politicized areas of contemporary life.

Wark lays out this merging of writing forms in the first chapter, where she describes the two “layers” of her writing style, autofiction and autotheory. The personal, anecdotal narratives that reflect Wark’s experiences as a participant in the scene reflect autofiction as the book’s binding structure. These stories take the reader through the middle of a dance floor where Wark illustrates her experiences dancing on drugs like mushrooms and ketamine. Ketamine provides a framework for Wark’s musings on time, where the physical environment and collective inebriation of a rave’s participants blur and disrupt the traditional linear structure through which humans have traditionally measured the passing hours. On the dance floor, Wark details the interactions she has with friends, lovers, and *punishers*, or what she (through her friend B) defines as usually straight, white, cisgender men who “treat the [rave] space as a spectacle for their entertainment, contribute nothing, and get in the way” (p. 92). Wark measures the time in between these interactions through beats rather than minutes or seconds, and illustrates how ketamine blurs even these musical delineations of linear time through its dissociative (or reassociative?) properties, allowing the user to lose their sense of reality in the midst of the rave. Wark defines this as *k-time*, where the turntables, speakers, and synthesizers that produce the musical environment of techno prompt the participant to reconstruct their concept of time through an emphasis on immediate sensorial experience. It is at these moments when Wark theorizes the individual experience of participatory listening that her writing shines: she imbues in the raver a logic with which they can track their experience on the dance floor, and provides a framework for the non-raver to infer the sensorial and relational dynamics which govern the often (intentionally) mysterious crowded club.

Wark attempts to use this same autotheoretical logic to generalize about nightlife more broadly, using her own experience to draw conclusions about dance music history, the way urban politics and economics affect nightlife cultures, and the racial dynamics which govern Brooklyn’s post-lockdown queer and trans dance music scene. However, by using the parties she attends as her only objects of analysis, the substantiation of her claims through grounded theoretical reasoning becomes stunted. Her limited breadth is perhaps most blatant in a section in chapter 5 that outlines her theory of *style extraction*: “Parties lose their aura, ongoiness, get replaced by others. . . . Often what kills it is the style extraction. Which inevitably starts with blackness, the most hauntedly auratic zone of situations—and also the one that can be harvested with maximum exploitation, particularly if it’s Black and queer and trans. The ballroom scene has been picked clean, from Madonna to *Paris is Burning* to *Pose* to *Legendary*” (p. 64). If the predominantly white, middle-class parties she attends do in fact “extract style” from the ballroom community, that claim is not elaborated on with historical evidence. It also says nothing of the underground ballroom scene’s resilience in the face of the capitalist media spotlight of the past few years. In North Brooklyn, OTA is a long-running weekly vogue night on Mondays at 3 Dollar Bill in Williamsburg, many Uptown vogue houses still thrive, and many stalwarts of New York’s
ballroom scene have been featured in the aforementioned mainstream media depictions, such as Dominique Jackson in *Pose* and MikeQ and Leiomy Maldonado in *Legendary*. Perhaps I have a different interpretation of “picked clean,” but to use vague, figurative language to describe the very material impact of capitalism on underground communities she is not a part of requires a degree of care and ethnographic diligence to substantiate her claims.

The limits of Wark’s autotheoretical framework extend to her intertwining musical and racial analyses. Musical analysis is limited; there are few references to specific tracks or artists, and her interpretation of the music lies solely within how it makes her feel, with little objective description of sounds to guide an unfamiliar reader. Where objective descriptions do exist, their veracity is questionable. She describes techno as “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” (p. 5). This is not true. Techno regularly exceeds 140 beats per minute, and many styles of techno such as hardgroove foreground acoustic drum samples in their composition. These tempos and styles are played regularly in North Brooklyn (particularly in the trans scene, where many affectionately refer to the faster, aggressive styles played by transfemme DJs as “doll techno”), so Wark’s framing of the genre is puzzling. Perhaps this detail is trivial to the larger structure of the book, but it again suggests a lack of close listening one would expect in a published text on a musical subject. For the unfamiliar, the aforementioned DeForrrest Brown Jr. text or *Energy Flash* by Simon Reynolds can provide more vivid sonic imagery of techno.

Throughout the book, Wark asserts that techno has roots in black urban America, particularly Detroit. She gestures at the ongoing debate between European and American aficionados on whether Berlin or Detroit can claim the genre’s origin story, and comes down on the side of Detroit’s claim, a consensus that continues to grow, particularly since the 2020 uprisings for racial justice that swept the globe. It is clear that Wark is well read in black liberatory theory, with claims rooted in black Marxism, afropessimism, and African diasporic history. However, she does not reckon with these texts or histories in a particularly thorough manner. She declares a link between blackness and transness through the rave, stating 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” (p. 9). This small paragraph ends with a footnote listing eight books that may validate this claim, but does not elaborate on how any of these texts may reckon with her ideas. Wark expects the reader to either be familiar with all of these books already, or seduced enough by her language and syntax to not bother diving deeper. Her modus operandi is clear in a rather flippant treatment of Queen Nanny of the Maroons in the final chapter: “I know [about Queen Nanny] because I just looked it up on my machine, here in bed with you. But what does that other history, of Black marronage and resistance, have to do with techno?” (p. 82). Queen Nanny’s 1732 uprising in Jamaica is a regularly cited historical inspiration for black liberatory techno projects like Drexciya (a household name among techno aficionados) and Underground Resistance (whom she cites as the impetus for her inquiry into Queen Nanny). Furthermore, there exists a clear musical lineage from Akan and Ashanti war drums among Caribbean maroons to black(-inspired) contemporary music genres cited in countless texts on black Atlantic history and musicology. Rather than reckoning with the historical data on its own terms, she reckons with how that historical data makes her feel, underplaying the impact of a centuries-long history of black resistance and music making.
Raving provides a framework for illustrating both the strengths and weaknesses of autotheoretical writing. Wark’s status as a devotee of the dance music scene is unquestionable, and the book provides illuminating ways to theorize personal and social dynamics inside the doors of a crowded club. Her positionality as a relatively older trans woman in the scene, an “othered body” in a sea of “othered bodies,” lends her an authority to make unique and keen observations with regard to how ravers relate to themselves and each other. The theories that come out of these observations are her strongest; ideas like k-time, enlustment, and ongoingness, concepts which relate to the immediate sensory encounters of dance floor participation and provide intimate frameworks to analyze the raving experience, which is no small feat under the haze of psychedelic and dissociative drugs. It is through this focus on the immediate that the value of a nonprofessional’s insight is made clear, and Raving’s placement in a series “by and about amateurs in the original sense” becomes more and more evident as one reads it. However, as Wark extends her authority to musical and racial histories on which she is no expert, the limitations of an analysis using solely autothoretical techniques become glaring. This is not inevitable; many accounts of rave practices from the perspective of a dancer act as insightful historical records of their respective scenes thanks to their focus on the immediate experience. (Doug Liman’s film Go [1999] and James Kirk and Two Fingas’s book Junglist [1995] immediately come to mind.) These works do not need to make bold claims about blackness or contain musicological analysis in order to be effective in this regard, and they are perhaps made better for it. In chapter 5, Wark cautions the reader that her autofiction and autotheory are “not to be taken too seriously” (p. 50). However, as a DJ and raver myself, as a witness both in my life and in my research to the devotion of its practitioners throughout the past five decades, and as someone who observes the ways that raving touches ever more pressing and intertwining themes of gentrification, commodification, and African diasporic histories, I question the need for a book on raving that sees itself so frivolously.
AUTHOR BIO

Kyle Rogers is a PhD student at New York University's Graduate School of Arts and Sciences studying ethnomusicology. His work is centered around the origins of jungle music in 1990s London and intersects with Afro-Caribbean diasporic histories, the politics of musical sampling, and postindustrial urbanity. He is also a DJ based in Brooklyn under the moniker AFTRMTH.

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HOW TO CITE


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