

Kathryn Arnett

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“Music in Our Hearts, Not Music in the Charts”: An Analysis of the Contemporary Electronic
Dance Music Scene

A room drips with sweat as hundreds of young people in bright colors dance sporadically to blaringly loud electronic music. Most are on MDMA, the amphetamine drug that produces feelings of empathy and increases tactile and auditory sensation. The disc jockey spins house music at 128 beats per minute, and as the bass pulsates through the room, the normal boundaries between self, other, music, and space dissolve into a euphoric oneness.

This scene could accurately describe a rave during the scene’s fruition in the United States in the early 1990s, or it could describe an electronic dance music event held today, in 2015. However, it is virtually unarguable that there has been a drastic change since the rave scene’s glory days of the 1990s, mainly due to commercialization and subsequent expansion (Anderson 319). The contemporary scene is now known as the scope of events that play electronic dance music, or EDM, and raves are a thing of the past. Many argue the change represents a disintegration and corruption of a significant subcultural scene grounded in the unique and anti-American ideals of PLUR: Peace, Love, Unity, and Respect (Anderson 319; Romero). As electronic dance music, or EDM, comes to connote big room house played by celebrity artists in multi-million-dollar-grossing Las Vegas clubs, musical legends and old ravers alike decry the mainstreaming a scene they knew as authentic and creative (Jarvis; Various interviews). This begs the question: Was the rave scene a subculture, in that it marked a space

which challenged and provided alternatives to mainstream American society's modes of being? If so, has it since lost its subcultural elements?

In this paper, I seek to present an analysis of the contemporary electronic dance music scene, and its relationship to its rave culture roots. I first give a history of the rave scene of the 1990s and early 2000s, and outline the central characteristics of the scene at its height, analyzing its subcultural elements. I root my analysis of rave as a subculture in Mark Hebdige's theory of subcultures as resistance against bourgeois cultural hegemony as it applies to the United States. Specifically, using Thaddeus Russell's *A Renegade History of the United States*, I situate rave culture within the mind-body dichotomy, with that of the mind being revered in the United States and that of the body being rejected or oppressed—but also being a site of resistance and subversion. I also complicate the notion of subculture with Daniel Bell's *Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, which explains that the culture of the body has already begun to revolutionize American culture through hedonistic consumerism. Finally, I utilize Marxist theory applied to culture to explain the subversive aspects of rave communalism. My primary focus, and primary research, is on the contemporary electronic dance music scene. Through a Qualtrics survey, interviews with members of the scene, field study, and secondary research, I define and analyze the electronic music scene today, and its situation within American society.

In contrast to the harsh criticism on the mainstreaming of rave culture, I argue that the EDM scene continues and builds upon aspects of the rave scene that made it subcultural and meaningful for youth in the 1990s and early 2000s, and ultimately that rave culture's integration into mainstream society renders it more culturally transformative and subversive than it was at its height.

To use Hebdige's theory of subcultural style, I begin with the thinking of Karl Marx. Marxism is the foundation from which I utilize all subsequent subcultural theory. At his simplest, Marx argues that in capitalist societies (like the United States), there are owners of the means of production, or the bourgeoisie, and those who must sell their labor to the bourgeoisie: the proletariat. As they have the most power and are in a conflicting position with the proletariat, the bourgeoisie exploits and oppresses the proletariat. For the purposes of this paper, I am interested in the ways this system of oppression manifests as and can be challenged through *culture*.

Antonio Gramsci asserted that the bourgeoisie maintains its power not primarily through economic means, but through cultural means. He explains that the State maintains capitalism through the creation of a statewide ideology: "[The State's] aim is always that of [...] adapting the 'civilisation' and the morality of the broadest popular masses to the necessities of the continuous development of the economic apparatus of production" (Gramsci 502). Members of the society adopt the State's ideology that sustains the current class hierarchies inherent in capitalism. In this way the proletariat unknowingly accepts and maintains the system that keeps the bourgeoisie in power. Roland Barthes describes this invisible process of bourgeois cultural hegemony: "Bourgeois ideology can therefore spread over everything and in so doing lose its name without risk: no one here will throw this name of bourgeois back at it" (138). As the proletariat unconsciously adopts bourgeois ideology, it becomes normalized, invisible, and continuously maintained by not only the bourgeoisie, but the proletariat as well.

Barthes explains that this "anonymous ideology" seeps into everyday culture as a system of signs (137). In his description of semiotics, or the "study of meaning-making," he says, "There are [...] the signifier, the signified and the sign, which is the associative total of the first two terms" (111). He uses the example of roses that signify his passion. The roses are the

signifier, and passion is the signified. But once roses become equated with passion, it becomes a sign, insofar as, “I cannot dissociate the roses from the message they carry, as to say [...] I cannot confuse the roses as signifier and the roses as sign: the signifier is empty, the sign is full, it is a meaning” (112). Our culture is made up of these signs loaded with meaning, specifically with the ideology of the bourgeoisie. Barthes describes the everydayness of this phenomenon:

Our press, our films, our theatre, our pulp literature, our rituals, our Justice, our diplomacy, our conversations, our remarks about the weather, a murder trial, a touching wedding, the cooking we dream of, the garments we wear [...] everything in everyday life is dependent on the representation which the bourgeoisie has and makes us have of the relations between man and the world. (139)

Bourgeois ideology gets applied to everyday artifacts, events, and occurrences, giving them meaning. In this process, these everyday artifacts and events become signs and myths, i.e. the components of culture, creating a cultural hegemony of the bourgeoisie. One contemporary and American example of these signs is the business suit. Developed in the late 18th century, the suit was purposefully designed to be difficult to move in, stiff and formless, and monochromatic (Kasson 8). The suit was created for the purpose of “gesticulating and talking abstractly” (Kasson 8). It *signified* that the wearer was above a blue-collar laborer, as he did not use his body to work. The suit became a *sign* of the managerial, professional class, and a component of American culture. The sign of the business suit maintains the ideology that laborers are inferior, different, and need to be distinguished from the superior upper classes. By expansion, it maintains capitalist class structure.

Building on these theories of culture, Mark Hebdige in his seminal work *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, asserts that subcultures challenge and expose cultural hegemony through the reinterpretation of signs and myths. Hebdige focuses on the importance of style in subcultures, as in fashion, aesthetics, and decorations, but also rituals and modes of being within the culture.

These styles can be read as the signs and myths described by Barthes. As subcultures' style is purposefully different than hegemonic cultures', it interrupts the process of normalization of dominant ideology in the society; it "goes against nature" (18). The drastically different aesthetic of subcultures such as punk or goth in the UK and the US draw attention to the notion of the *construction* of style, puncturing a hole in the fabric of normal society and challenging cultural hegemony. He states,

By repositioning and recontextualizing commodities, by subverting their conventional uses and inventing new ones, the subcultural stylist gives the lie to what Althusser has called the 'false obviousness of everyday practice' (Althusser and Balibar, 1968), and opens up the world of objects to new and covertly oppositional readings. (Hebdige 102)

Subcultural style creates possibilities for alternate ways of being, and hopefully revolutionary ones, by revealing the "lie" of bourgeois culture as natural, and by creating new signs separate from the bourgeoisie's. Hebdige expands on the social and political importance of style. Using the example of Jean Genet's book, *The Thief's Journal*, where the Spanish police confiscate his tube of Vaseline because of its implication of his homosexuality, he states,

Just as the conflict between Genet's 'unnatural' sexuality and the policemen's 'legitimate' outrage can be encapsulated in a single object, so the tensions between dominant and subordinate groups can be found reflected in the surfaces of subculture – in the styles made up of mundane objects which have a double meaning. (Hebdige 3)

Subculture, then, becomes culturally revolutionary as it is the site for the subversion of bourgeois culture and challenges the status quo.

In summary, according to Gramsci, oppressors exert and maintain power over the oppressed through cultural hegemony. Barthes states that this culture is made up of everyday signs and myths that become normalized, invisible, and serve to uphold current systems of power. Hebdige articulates the power of subcultures as at once constructing new signs and

drawing attention to the process of construction, opening the possibility for a revolutionary change of culture. I utilize all three to ground my analysis of US rave culture through time.

But how does this theory map on to the United States specifically? What are the criteria for mainstream style, signs, or ideologies, versus subcultural or potentially revolutionary ones? Mind-body dualism offers a useful lens with which to view American culture and history. As Thaddeus Russell articulates in *A Renegade History of the United States*, Puritanism defines the early history of the United States (347-348). Not only a religious haven for the Puritan British, the great frontier meshed perfectly with their valuation of the work ethic and self-restraint (Russell 145). The harsh conditions in which Puritans had to construct their society mandated a strict adherence to these Puritan values, putting work first and leaving little time for fun (Russell 145). As Russell explains, “Partly out of necessity, partly for independence, and partly from their devotion to the Protestant work ethic, the first American colonists eliminated many forms of leisure enjoyed by those who remained in England” (145). Those deemed having fun, or indulging in pleasure, were suppressed and condemned; they were a threat to the survival of the society. Among the traditions of leisure suppressed by early American society were, “Various folk dances, singing festivals, communal feasts and games, and scores of holidays” (Russell 145-146). From the beginning, the United States has valued work over leisure.

American politics and economy are steeped in the Puritanical tradition as well. The Founding Fathers determined that a democracy needs self-governing, self-regulating citizens to function. As Russell explains, “Democracy forced the people to shed their pleasures and surrender their personal freedom, because they alone would shoulder the responsibility of managing society” (Russell 84). Lastly, Puritanism fit well into the United States’ economic system of capitalism in the 18th century. Russell highlights Benjamin Franklin, a Founding

Father, as one who conceptually married these two concepts for the public: “In the eighteenth century, Benjamin Franklin adapted the Puritan work ethic to the age of capitalism with his enormously popular aphorisms that counseled Americans to work all hours of the day in order to achieve dignity and respect” (149). Capitalism mandated the values of hard work and delayed gratification; laborers must be productive for the system to survive, and wait for the pay off of monetary reward. These Puritanical values, embedded in the heart of United States politics and society, constitute the mind in mind-body dualism.

In Puritan Christianity, the mind is seen as loftier than the body because the mind is closer to God, and the body is closer to animals, due to its association with animalistic desires. This dynamic manifests societally with the mind necessarily suppressing and condemning the body to sustain our political and economic systems. In terms of capitalism, to work all day with no immediate gain means rejecting bodily pleasures in favor of the rational thought that one’s hard work will be rewarded later. Politically, those seeking immediate gratification or blindly pursuing their desires could not sustain the rational, calculated work of governing the country, and threatened the political system of democracy that necessitates self-government. Therefore, historically in the United States, those of the mind have suppressed those of the body, which manifests as the bourgeoisie oppressing the proletariat.

Throughout his work, Russell explains how the political and economic elite constitute the mind and suppress the so-called masses who are associated with the body. The elite define themselves in terms of the mind, as rational, intellectual, and composed, and as having to control the depraved masses. Russell cites John Adams’ concerns about his new nation’s lack of morality during the American Revolution, describing Americans as having “vicious and luxurious and effeminate Appetites, Passions and Habits, a more dangerous Army to American

Liberty than Mr. Howes” (qtd. in Russell 35). Those who fit this description included virtually everyone who did not fit the demographics of the most powerful (i.e., everyone who is not a white, middle to upper class, heterosexual, male). As demonstrated in Adams’ quote, the majority of citizens were deemed of the body: animalistic, slaves to their own desires, and a threat to American democracy. This provides insight into the common and still-prevalent stereotype of Black people as animalistic, hypersexual, and subhuman; they are thought of as “the body.” As bell hooks articulates, “Within neo-colonial white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy, the Black male body continues to be perceived as the embodiment of bestial, violent, penis-as-weapon hypermasculine assertion” (75). Given American systems of power that place rich white men at the top of the hierarchy, and thus closer to God within Puritan thought, the Black male, near the bottom of this hierarchy, is perceived as grotesquely bodily: violent, sexual, and animalistic. In addition, laborers, working with their body in jobs such as “farming, manufacturing, construction, maintenances [...] *et cetera*,” are considered “*dirty*, less-well paid and bear[ing] lower status,” as they are categorized as “the body” (Haberman 21, italics in original). Either those who use their body are seen as inferior, or those who have been subjugated to lower status due to racism are stereotyped as bodily to legitimize their subjugation. In short, mind-body dualism at least partially explains systems of oppression in the United States.

While it is clear that the American valuation of the mind is used to oppress certain groups, it also generally curtails our personal freedoms. Although no one would argue that the body, carnal desires, and a quest for pleasure should be valued over rationality and logic, the overvaluation of the mind in American society restricts the freedoms we often think of as central to what makes us American. Russell argues that the Founding Fathers are “enemies of freedom,” because they imposed such harsh restrictions on fun seeking and pleasure in order to establish a

democracy (Russell 28). Indeed, the weekend, bars that serve alcohol, and movie theaters are all elements of American culture that the average American had to create and fight for in the face of governmental restrictions and suppression (Russell). These elements of freedom can be seen as a championing of the body: of pleasure, leisure, and fulfillment of desire. Thus, while the body is a site of subjugation, it has simultaneously been one of resistance and revolution.

The body as a site of subversion becomes key in analyzing the subcultural aspects of rave subculture. Blacks in the United States have a legacy of embracing the body as a means of resistance against oppression and bourgeoisie culture. During the 1920s, the zoot suit became a sign of a Black working class hipster subculture. Robin Kelley explains the significance of the zoot suit in American society with his description of Malcolm X trying his on for the first time: “When Malcolm put on his very first zoot suit, he realized immediately that the wild sky-blue outfit, the baggy Punjab pants tapered to the ankles [...] were more than a suit of clothes [...] The suit reflected a struggle to negotiate [...] multiple identities in opposition to the dominant culture” (166). Kelley’s articulation of the significance of the zoot suit strongly parallels Hebdige’s description of subcultural fashion as a rebellion against hegemonic culture. The zoot suit parodies the business suit, which I described earlier as being a symbol for professionalism, intellectualism, and now we see, of the mind. With ostentatious colors, oversized shoulder pads and wide pant legs, the zoot suit draws attention to and celebrates bodily form. Its corruption of the business suit represents a direct attack on the cultural hegemony of the mind.

Even further back in history, slaves operated outside of white society, and their culture celebrated the body through rhythmic music and free-form dance (Russell 211-213). This rich cultural tradition carries on, from the dancehalls of the 1920s to the discos of the 1970s, and as we shall see, up to the creation of house and techno music in the 1980s. Blackness has emerged

as associated with the body, directly or indirectly challenging the bourgeois hegemonic culture of the mind.

Perhaps understandably, then, white subcultures have been known to borrow heavily from Blackness in their attempts to defy the status quo (Hebdige 47). Hipsters and beats of the 1960s mythologized the Black man as free from the constraints of white, bourgeois life, because he operates outside of it due to his race and class (Hebdige 48). They imitated Black art, which they saw as freer, more subversive, and more authentic than white art, because it articulates an aesthetic different and contrary to bourgeois culture (Hebdige 48). In Chambers' words, "Embedded in Black culture, in Black music, are oppositional values which in a fresh context served to symbolize [...] the contradictions and tensions played out in [white] youth subculture," as they are seeking to rebel against the mainstream society of which they are a part (Chambers 166). This happens often and is not limited to style: while skinheads borrowed heavily from reggae, rock and roll of course owes its success and creation to blues and gospel music (Hebdige 50). Because of racism, the Black contribution to these subcultures is often played down or completely erased (Hebdige 56). Although their cultural signs are potentially revolutionary, they fail to create a model for racial liberation. Later, I show how this dynamic reappears in the majority white rave subculture as it emerged from Black-invented house music.

As white subcultures appropriate Black subcultures, the mainstream appropriates subcultures in general. According to Hebdige, this happens in two ways. The first is through the "labeling and re-definition of deviant behavior by dominant groups" such as the police and the media (Hebdige 94). The threatening aspects of a subculture are either trivialized, with its participants being characterized as more similar to the mainstream than they appear, or the subculture is considered so different that they are made to be subhuman, and irrelevant. The

second way subcultures become absorbed into the mainstream is through the conversion of subcultural signs (such as fashion or music) into mass produced objects, commoditizing the culture. Hebdige argues that subcultures occupy the realm of leisure, consumption, and pleasure in society; they express themselves not in factories or the workplace but in nightclubs, parks: public spaces (84-85). Thus, in capitalistic nations like Britain (where he writes) and the United States, subcultures cannot escape commercialization, because new signs are *produced*; they can thus be overproduced, and sold in the mainstream market. In this process, often the signs are diluted, or made more palatable for those who uphold the status quo, arguably stripping away its subcultural capital.

Ryan Moore introduces this notion of subcultural capital, saying, “Claims to subcultural capital are based on perceptions of authenticity and distance from mainstream culture” (232). If a subculture becomes integrated into the mainstream, then by definition it ceases to be a subculture. This is because:

When music and style [members of the subculture] believe to be ‘under- ground’ is commercialized and becomes available to a mass market, they experience a sense of alienation because they no longer own or control the culture they have produced and their expressions of rebellion are now consumed by the ‘mainstream’ audience they define themselves against. (Moore 233)

For Moore, the worth of a subculture is the extent to which its members feel they have created an alternative space for themselves that goes against the mainstream. Their goal is not to integrate; it is to distance, and they define themselves based on what the mainstream is not. They see the mainstream market as a fake, uncreative space of “conformity” where people create products for profit, in contrast to a subculture where people are invested in creating an authentic culture and system of signs that satisfy “a discriminate ear for the right sound and eye for the right look”

(Moore 232). A discerning taste becomes a sign that one is not blindly following the hype of mainstream culture.

Moore asserts that once the signs are commercialized, they lose subcultural value. In many instances, these signs stay the same: “The same sense of authenticity, rebellion, and coolness that distinguishes subcultural insiders also can be converted into a valuable commodity by the culture industry” (Moore 232). However, the fact that they are mainstream means they no longer can be considered subcultural, as subcultural capital is a scarce commodity that can only belong to a minority” (Moore 233). Hebdige agrees: “As soon as the original innovations which signify ‘subculture’ are translated into commodities and made generally available, they become ‘frozen’” because they no longer are being produced for creativity’s sake, instead, the signs are reproduced for profit (Hebdige 96). Subcultural theorists assert that mainstream adoption is a subculture’s death sentence.

I disagree. If the signs of the subculture remain the same as they are adopted by the mainstream, there is potential for powerful cultural change. Daniel Bell boldly asserts in *Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* that the commercialization of the body, or the central signifier of American subculture, has already begun to revolutionize United States hegemonic culture. Bell says:

Today, each new generation [...] declares in sweeping fashion that the status quo represents a state of absolute repression, so that, in a widening gyre, new and fresh assaults on the social structure are mounted. This, I believe, has been happening in the last two decades [the 1950s to the 1970s]. (18)

Because of the scale of youth rejection of Puritan values, Bell believes that “fantasy” and “boundless experiment” are now the norm, and the “adversary culture has come to dominate the social order” (30, 17). Since the economic boom of the 1920s, when the middle class had excess

money and purchasing power, mass consumerism has begun to dismantle Puritan values of “work, sobriety, frugality, sexual restraint, and a forbidding attitude toward life” (Bell 31). Delayed gratification lost to the instant gratification of buying and consuming. Consumerism is connected to the value of the body and what it represents: fulfilling desire, and indulging in pleasure and fun.

Russell argues this happened in part because at the turn of the century, immigrant and working class women created a subculture of sorts around consumerism and entertainment (Russell 570). Although condemned and labeled as “bad women” by mainstream society, these women used their extra wages, meager as they were, to go out dancing, and to buy ostentatious clothing that directly countered the monochromatic suit (Russell 568-577). This alternative to mainstream propriety and restraint worked its way into the mainstream because the bourgeoisie benefit from consumerism—it increases their capital. They began to hesitantly encourage it even though it threatens their cultural values. Now, Bell argues, American culture is “prodigal, promiscuous, dominated by an antirational, anti-intellectual temper,” unarguably the body within the mind-body dualism (15). As this culture becomes the norm, we see “many children of upper-middle-class families joyfully embracing what they think is the ‘freedom’ of working-class or Black, lower-class life-styles” (15). Although pointing to the same phenomenon, Bell disagrees with Moore and Hebdige that this signifies the erosion of such culture; quite the opposite, he believes it marks the beginnings of cultural revolution. I use Bell’s convincing argument to flip the traditional script on the commodification of subculture, arguing that as rave culture has entered the mainstream, its revolutionary potential has increased.

A legitimate counterargument to this assertion is that if capitalism upholds the culture of the body, this so-called revolutionary culture would not do much to dismantle the system that

allows for bourgeois supremacy in the first place. Indeed, it seems it would only serve to reinforce the problematic and oppressive economic system. I have two responses. First, I want to make clear that I am arguing that *cultural* revolution is possible through the valuation of the body, although I agree it does little to disrupt our current oppressive economic system. However, I believe culture is an important and often overlooked aspect in the effort for a freer, more equitable society, and it is thus vital to emphasize its potential.

Bell also leaves out a sophisticated analysis of how culture intersects with race, gender, and sexuality, making sweeping generalizations about the acceptance and adoption of what he calls “adversary culture.” I acknowledge that in my analysis I also do not offer an in-depth analysis of these intersections. For the scope of my paper, I focus on the cultural aspects of, for the most part, a white, middle to upper class scene, on the grounds of the signs and rituals themselves as subversive, with a brief analysis of their implications on and interactions with identity. Further analysis from this angle would be beneficial to the current literature.

Secondly, I argue that raves, both then and now, transcend mind-body duality through their emphasis on communalism. One need only look to the Red Scare and McCarthyism of the Cold War Era to see that Communist values are extremely threatening to the United States and its economic system. Karl Marx asserts that capitalism thrives on competition and self-interest. Capitalism’s “constantly expanding market” requires competition amongst capitalists selling similar products to produce growth (16). This, in turn, creates a class of people (the bourgeoisie) that have “left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest” (15). Far from a culture of sharing and altruism, capitalism thrives on individual greed. Because people benefit in a capitalistic society from getting ahead at the expense of others, Marx argues that this individuality in capitalism creates “naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation” (16).

I apply Marxist theory to a cultural analysis of American culture and rave/EDM subculture. Capitalism translates into a privileging of individualism and competition, not only in economic terms, but culturally as well. In the United States and other Western, capitalistic countries, the individual and their unique potential is emphasized, and the impact of social groups and context is minimized. This even translates into a psychological conceptualization of one's self as a fixed, separate entity that is not part of, nor greatly influenced by, other people or relationships, and who "behaves primarily as a consequence of [...] internal attributes] (Markus and Kitayama 224). This sense of individualism is foundational to the capitalistic idea of the American dream, and supports the idea that anyone who works hard enough can succeed economically in the United States. Edén E. Torres calls this "bootstrap" mythology, in reference to the popular sentiment of pulling oneself up from their bootstraps (Torres 93). This leads to a blame-the-victim mentality in the United States that attributes people of color and poor people's chronically subordinate condition to their lack of individual work ethic or other deficiencies (Ryan 163). Similar to the culture of the mind facilitating the oppression of social groups in American society, American individualism also legitimizes and upholds systems of oppression.

On the other hand, marginalized groups have historically uplifted a more communal view of themselves and society. Latina/os generally hold an interdependent sense of self, thinking of the self in terms of their relationship to others (Holoway et al). During the Civil Rights and Feminist movements of the 1960s, women attempted to redefine group dynamics by decentering leaders and creating a more equal and democratic activist strategy within both these movements, the notable among them being Ella Baker and Florynce Kennedy (Stall & Stoecker; Randolph). It is also no accident that the Black Panthers were socialists who drew from Marxist theory to advocate for their liberation, seeing racism as tied to capitalism in that white people owned and

controlled property and the means of production (Black Panther Party Platform and Program). Communalism, subversion and liberation are closely intertwined in American history.

Culturally, raves and EDM have a value for community, unity, connectedness, and ego loss. These values operate outside of capitalist values and constitute subversion and resistance of individualism and competition. They facilitate a worldview of people as interconnected and empathetic to each other, recognizing, in Marx's words, that "the happiness of the individual is inseparable from the happiness of all" (37). The value of communalism offers an even more powerful opportunity to redefine American values because of its resistance to the heart of capitalism (individualism) and its imagining of a more equitable society, as opposed to the valuation of the body which can still operate within this economic framework, albeit contradictorily. For this reason I find EDM culture even today to be uniquely subcultural in their valuation of both body and communalism, and spend this essay articulating exactly how.

I first begin by analyzing the history of raves through the theoretical framework I have outlined thus far.

In describing the history of raves, one must choose a time and place where raves began, and by extension, the definition of a rave. At their simplest, I choose to define raves as events where people dance to electronic dance music. I could limit the definition to only warehouse or illegitimate parties playing such music, or to those that most obviously defy social norms through various subcultural signs. But this would erase what I consider the origins of rave culture, and the various forms it has taken through the years. Given this, I start with the origination of the music that led to rave culture, specifically, house music. Although techno music was invented prior to house and had deep influence on electronic dance music, house music more directly created a subculture in the spaces in which it was played, and had a larger

impact on the electronic dance music that is popular today. For this reason, I begin with the history and subcultural elements of house music and its spaces.

House music originated in Chicago in the late 1980s with Frankie Knuckles as resident DJ at The Warehouse, a gay nightclub in the city. To quote Simon Reynolds, the author of probably the most comprehensive historical explanation of the rave scene internationally, *Generation Ecstasy*, house music was an approach to disc-jockeying that made “‘dead’ music come alive” through cutting and reworking samples of old disco tracks (Reynolds 25). The new sound was coined “house,” as in music one would hear at The Warehouse (Reynolds 25). In terms of the music itself, house is indisputably of the body. It was born after the “Disco Sucks” movement, and it glorified everything people hated about disco: banality, its encouragement of hyper-sexuality, and its essentially meaninglessness (Reynolds 24). In other words, house music valued the body over the mind; it was unabashedly animalistic and unintellectual.

Furthermore, house was made for dancing. Under old disco tracks would be a heavy bass to a 4/4 beat (a bass drum played on every beat), often called “four on the floor.” The tempo was around 120-160 beats per minute. The steady and simple beat, constant throughout multiple-hour-long sets, cannot be intellectualized, is not complicated, and is meant for one purpose: dancing. Lawrence Grossberg articulated, “Rather than dancing to the music you like, you like the music you can dance to,” and house fits this description (Grossberg 56). Thus, the music’s worth was based on its ability to make its listeners want to move their bodies. Calling those who went to house clubs “slaves to the rhythm,” Reynolds points out that house music renders its listeners “less than human” by “direct possession of the nervous system via the bass-biology interface” (29). He refers to the experience of feeling the loud, thumping beat of house music inside one’s body, thus having the music bypass cognition and move the body almost

involuntarily. House music enthusiasts gleefully engaged in this type of animalistic abandon, defying the American obsession with rationality, cognition, and self-restraint.

Dancing has always been associated with the body, and thus condemned, in the United States. Attempts by American elites to punish or control the behavior date back as early as the 1630s (Russell 349). Moving one's body to a rhythm, as minister Joseph Bellamy of Connecticut put it in the late 1700s, makes people "so very vain, and extravagant, and ungovernable" (qtd. in Russell 132). Organized dance gatherings, such as the Merrymount settlement where settlers danced around a maypole with Native Americans, were suppressed during the early days of American colonies (Russell 349-350). House clubs during the 1980s certainly parallel these early dance gatherings for their centrality on danceable music and bodily abandon. Dancing and what it signifies—feeling into one's body, allowing a rhythm to move the body without thinking—is completely opposite to the hegemonic culture of the mind. As we will see, the tradition of dancing as central to the ritual of rave subculture remains fairly constant through its history; its contemporary name, electronic dance music, is no accident.

House music would be incomplete without the space to dance to it and the dancers themselves, making the early house music culture more than simply a new genre of music. The Warehouse would be packed with 2,000 people, mostly Black and/or gay and working class, dancing for hours on end (Rietveld 19). The demographics and atmosphere of inclusivity made The Warehouse a refuge for the marginalized. This even took on a religious dimension: Frankie Knuckles described the Warehouse as "church for people who have fallen from grace," especially considering the reality that many attendees literally were excluded from the churches they belonged to because of their sexuality (Reynolds 30). Deep house, house's soulful subgenre, often contained lyrics that harkened back to the Civil Rights Movement, such as Db's "I Have a

Dream” (Reynolds 30). Although never overtly political, house music played in spaces that celebrated and accepted the other. A safe space amidst a discriminatory world, house clubs proved themselves subcultural in that they provided an alternate way of being from the oppressive mainstream (Rietveld 21).

At the same time the Warehouse was exploding, Larry Levan was bringing what would become known as garage music to Paradise Garage, a gay club in New York City. The spiritual atmosphere and the communalism the space facilitated resembles that of the later raves more closely than the Warehouse, which is why it is important to illustrate here. Populated with gay, Black and Latino/a club-goers, the Garage was, in John Iozia’s words, “Tribal and totally anti-Western” because of its ritualistic and communal dancing that took on an almost religious aspect (qtd in Reynolds 35). Notably, Iozia distinguishes this from Western values because it accentuates both the body and the feeling of communion with others—dancing to a steady beat in unison, dancers lose their normal sense of boundaries and feel at one with the environment and with others (Rietveld 165-168). The Garage was a place that actively cultivated the feeling of spiritual unity, so much so that veterans called it their “church” (Reynolds 35). Larry Levan became a “DJ-as-shaman,” with his main purpose to create a sensory experience that sent attendees on a musical and spiritual journey (Reynolds 35). Losing themselves to the moment and the community accounts for feelings of unity and connection with the divine.

As Kalweit notes from the perspective of anthropological studies of Shamanism, “It takes surprisingly little to turn human consciousness upside down or cause it to disintegrate [...] the uninterrupted repetition of an activity to the point of total exhaustion is an important triggering mechanism” (qtd in Rietveld 192). As this happens, “Awareness of the outside world can disappear [...] the observable subject disappears” (Rietveld 192). Dancers become a part of the

environment, instead of a discrete, removed observer. This constitutes a disintegration of normal cognition and an emergence in physical experience, devaluing the mind and privileging the body and the sensory, so much so that the dancers feel a connection with a higher power.

Even more revolutionary, ego loss at these events erases judgments about the so-called other, and social status becomes less important. Rietveld notes this is a “forging of a community which (may) lie outside conventional hierarchical social structures” (193). As DuBois and many others have shown, distancing from dissimilar groups prevents coalitions that can rise up against the oppressor in efforts towards liberation, for instance, in the case of the white working class refusing to unite with Blacks of the same class towards class revolution on account of racism (721-723). Even if apolitical, the intentional dissolving of traditional boundaries into one experience is thus a subversive act. It represents a movement towards communalism and the values of equality and loss of identity so feared by mainstream America. These themes of unity and spirituality, cultivated in Paradise Garage and The Warehouse, became central to the rave scene in later years.

As house spread across the Atlantic to the UK, the British took elements like all-night dancing and communalism that had started to proliferate in Chicago and New York and created a culture around it, that would become known as rave culture. Paul Oakenfold, a British DJ and later producer, created the club called Shoom, which integrated house music with the new club drug Ecstasy that was emerging at the time. The scene at Shoom was heterosexual, but it grew out of the tradition of the US gay club scene, and beyond that, it extolled the virtues of Ecstasy: “‘It was all these suburbanites who’d taken Ecstasy and it was if they were releasing themselves *for the first time.*’ Gay behavioral codes and modes of expression were entering the body-consciousness of straight working class boys, via Ecstasy” (Reynolds 60). Meaning, the effusive

love, camaraderie, and acceptance of the gay clubs in the US was transmitted through the effects of this new drug to a more mainstream and traditionally masculine population. A similar sentiment expressed itself when the scene and the drug traveled back to the United States.

Because of club licensing laws, the UK club scene ended early in the night, so attendees started going to illegal after-hours parties to continue the party, many of which were thrown in abandoned warehouses. These illegal parties, carrying over the music, dancing and atmosphere of the eccentric UK clubs in the late 1980s, are the first appearance of the most prototypical definition of “rave,” in their most underground form (Reynolds 62).

While the scene was exploding in the UK, it had been declining in the US, as artists from Detroit, Chicago and New York traveled to play for the more enthusiastic audiences across the Atlantic. By the time techno and house DJs were getting booked in the US again after their popularity in Europe, there was a generation gap. The media made attending house clubs into the latest fad of sorts, and the Black and gay audience felt isolated and went back underground, while young white kids began to enter the scene (Sicko 80-81). The older audience also did not approve of the increase in drug use among these younger kids, as the popularity of Ecstasy in the UK had traveled to the United States (Sicko 81).

This gap between the early days of house and the early 1990s young white rave scene was exacerbated by the hardcore techno (or simply “hardcore”) genre that had its first appearances in Britain and became the music of choice for the new US rave kids (Silcott 41). Hardcore music was much faster (from 160 to even 200 bpm), less melodic, and more intense than house. And when the British scene came to the US, many of its demographics came with it: the new US rave scene was mostly straight, white, middle-class, and male (Hutson 35-36). It is important to note that even before the mainstreaming of the scene in the late 2000s, it had

changed drastically, demographically and culturally, during the early 1990s. However, I will show that it maintained and added subcultural elements, to the extent that now people lament the loss of this demographically non-diverse scene even more than the early days of house.

The United States rave scene of the 1990s began in 1989 New York with DJ Frankie Bones, an American DJ and producer who started throwing small underground raves directly modeled after a rave he attended in Britain (Reynolds 144-145). As these raves grew, Bones named them “STORMraves” and held them in warehouses and at beaches. The music was hardcore, and the drug of choice was Ecstasy.

Ecstasy, or MDMA in its pure form, became central to the experience of rave, to the point where Ecstasy became almost synecdochic of the experience. Ecstasy’s empathy-inducing social effects helped create a culture of love and unity amidst ravers who danced long into the night. Ecstasy is a perfect example of a subcultural sign in the rave scene that pushes back against mainstream values because it is a portal to total submergence in the body and emphasizes feelings of communalism and unity.

On the most basic level, drugs have never been accepted by formal American culture, for obvious reasons: they are for pleasure and recreation, and incapacitate people from performing tasks needed on the job. But for ravers, Ecstasy is not only accepted, it is part and parcel of raves, because it builds upon what is already present in the experience (Reynolds 83). Ecstasy heightens all senses, so music sounds crisper, lights appear brighter, and touch feels more pleasurable and intense. In addition to the loud music, crowds of dancing people, and light shows already present at raves, taking Ecstasy plunges ravers even more deeply into the sensory experience of the present moment. Ecstasy also dampens cognitive functioning, explicitly

devaluing and deemphasizing the mind. These components make Ecstasy the ideal drug for bodily pleasure:

The [raver] high on Ecstasy, abandoned to the beat, lost under the strobe lights consumes the radically different space of Dionysian pleasure: dance, music and drugs. To understand the pleasures of the dance floor we must move to a different logic of tourism where one comes to hide from the spectre of a former self [...] to disaccumulate culture and disappear [...] into the body. (Melechi 32)

The sign of Ecstasy demonstrates the centrality of sensory pleasure and indulgence to the experience of rave, making the scene powerfully subcultural in its emphasis on the body.

The sensory overload of Ecstasy along with its euphoric components facilitates the dissolving of traditional boundaries I mentioned previously. Ecstasy promotes feelings of empathy, connection, and openness with others, creating a culture counter to American individualism and competition. Ravers during the 1990s report these feelings in Jimi Fritz's book *Rave Culture*. One raver said of his first rave, "Fifteen hundred people became very close friends. I met so many new people and by the end of the night we were all friends [...] we were opened up to each other's feelings but the communication wasn't verbal" (Fritz 47). Unlike the individualistic and self-centered mentality of mainstream America, raves promote friendship and connection, and notably, non-verbal emotional bonding, transcending the mind. Another states, "Raves [have the] concept of the shared experience; a feeling of unity often arises and people are open and friendly to one another" (Fritz 52). Raves offer an alternative space where connection and community are valued.

Rietveld explains, "[Ecstasy's] empathic quality means that one can lose one's identity in the music and in the social space" (181). This sense of oneness with others and the environment threatens capitalism, which depends on competition, and by extension, social hierarchies in general. Just as "Ecstasy was a miracle cure for the English disease of emotional constipation, reserve, and inhibition," it too was a balm for American culture, where individualism and

competition are virtuous, and where isolation is increasingly common (Reynolds 65; Tomlinson 195-211). With the help of Ecstasy, ravers created an environment that values and promotes the themes of connection and equality.

Bones and the STORMraves were responsible for making these themes a concrete aspect of the US rave culture through additional signs and rituals. Bones is credited with the creation of the raver motto, “PLUR,” which stands for Peace, Love, Unity, and Respect, after he shouted into the microphone when a fight broke out, “If you don’t start showing some peace, love, and unity, I’ll break your fucking faces” (Pilcher 128). Although ironic, this quote morphed into an intentional agreement among ravers to look out for each other and foster a loving and accepting environment at raves. The formation of PLUR is one of the founding principles of the uniquely American rave subculture. This is a concrete sign of the value of community in the rave scene. One raver at a popular rave created a leaflet describing the scene: “This scene [...] is about something special about unity and happiness. It is about being yourself and being loved for it [...] Newcomers – you are wanted and you should know that this scene is about openness. We all share a bond – the desire to groove to a good beat all night long” (qtd in Reynolds 305). The values of connection and community were foundational to the US rave scene, and were what made the scene so special in the context of an individualistic and unfriendly society.

Along with the motto of PLUR came the emergence of Kandi, beaded bracelets that ravers would make and exchange with new friends they met during a rave. Many ravers wore Kandi up their arms (called a “sleeve”) as a sign of their commitment to and experience in the scene. Kandi became a subcultural sign of the friendly, open, connected vibe of raves that distinguished it from mainstream individualism and competition.

On this note, US rave culture created its own distinct fashion style and symbols, connecting directly to Hebdige's aspect of the stylistic component of subculture. Starting mainly with NASA (Nocturnal Audio and Sensory Awakening), the events put on in Manhattan by Db and DJ Scotto shortly after STORM, these ravers developed a style that was, in Mireille Silcott's words:

Skateboarder fashion, old-school hip-hop, and preschool favorites, their dress code consisted of pixie skirts, fuzzy-animal rucksacks, pigtails, and baby-Ts for girls; for guys, there were woolly hats and long wallet chains dangling off the side of fatter-than-fat phat pants. And pacifiers for everyone. (45)

Raver fashion during this time is strikingly childlike, especially for the women. This marks a regression to a less intellectual stage of psychological development, and a rejection of adulthood given the rules and norms that go along with it, which mandate rationality and self-restraint (Rietveld 197). Ravers take this criticism and embrace it as a positive, their fashion a gleeful expression of the fun and carefreeness so valued at raves. This even translated into an asexuality among ravers, who were more interested in sharing and connecting on a friendly level than courting each other, much like the innocent interactions of childhood (Rietveld 197).

Pacifiers were used as a fashion statement and also to help with bruxism (jaw clenching), a side effect of Ecstasy. They signify an even more extreme regression into infantilism, or using Freudian theory, to the first stage of psychosexual development: the Oral Stage (Freud 64). There is a connection between the Oral Stage, where sexuality is first channeled to outside objects and the world is literally taken in and consumed by the infant, to the raver's fixation with sensory stimuli and the ingesting of drugs. Pacifiers are signs for ravers' unique interaction with their environment. Drawing on Marcuse's theory of regression, Rietveld argues in the context of childlike elements of raves, "Regressing to state of prelinguistic infantility could be seen as progressive in context of repressive society" (Rietveld 197). Indeed, the Puritan values upheld by

the American elite are repressive in their condemnation of fun, pleasure, and sexuality. The pacifier represents a return to unintellectual, physical, experiential, and curious infantilism.

Even though these ravers certainly stood on the outside of society, sucking on pacifiers and taking Ecstasy, the scene was expanding exponentially. “Massives,” or large-scale raves with multiple stages and performers, became common forms of rave relatively early on in their development. Rave America drew 17,000 people to Knots Berry Farm in California in 1993 (“How Rave” Reynolds). Toon Town in San Francisco around the same time drew around 8,000 (“How Rave” Reynolds). Although the rave scene was underground, hosted in illegal locations, in the United States it was not small scale. Massives were emblematic of the scene from the beginning.

There was a dip in the rave scene in the mid-1990s, until the “electronica buzz” of 1997, when the more poppy and synthetic sounds from artists like the Prodigy and the Chemical Brothers became popular in mainstream cultural media such as MTV and television commercials (“How Rave” Reynolds). Around the same time, trance music “spurred a resurgence of raves in Southern California” especially, with desert raves holding from 20,000 to 40,000 attendees (“How Rave” Reynolds).

In 2002, the scene was jeopardized by a series of legal attacks from the federal government. As Moore notes, government attacks on subcultures reveal their threat to the status quo. The American government saw raves, with their drugs, hedonism, and lawlessness, as something that must be controlled and suppressed, paralleling the controlling of early dance gatherings in the colonial period (Russell 349-350). The Reducing Americans Vulnerability to Ecstasy Act (not-so-subtly known as the RAVE Act), would have made it illegal for venues to host parties where illegal drugs entered, and designated them “crack houses.” Although this

original bill didn't pass, in 2003 an almost identical one (The Illicit Drug Anti-Proliferation Act) did, effectively killing the scene for the time being (Sicko 82). When the scene returned, it was rebranded, and changed in important ways.

Tracing the aspects of US rave culture through time, I illustrate that raves during the 1990s and early 2000s were undoubtedly subcultural in their valuation of the body and communal unity. Now, I will outline the changes of the scene in the late 2000s up until now, and the scathing critiques of this new phenomenon, now called the EDM scene after its rebranding.

When subcultures become threatening to mainstream society, there are two ways the hegemonic institutions that be attack it: through direct crackdowns and suppression, as we have seen with police raids and legislation like the RAVE Act, or through cooptation, where they commercialize it and strip it of its subversive elements until it becomes palatable and non-threatening (Moore 229). The latter began to happen in the rave scene towards the end of the 2000s, and exploded in the past two or three years, bringing us to today, where the epicenter of EDM culture, Electronic Daisy Festival (EDC), now hosts over 100,000 attendees, and the EDM industry rakes in \$6.2 billion annually (Alvarado). As the scene underwent its most drastic change, rebranding itself and its cultural symbols to distance from "rave," the music became classified as Electronic Dance Music. From this point forward in my essay, when discussing the scene in the late 2000s and onward, I refer to it as the EDM scene, or EDM culture.

Anderson, writing in 2009, outlined several reasons for what she deems the "alteration and decline" of rave culture up to that time (307). This is the most recent analysis of the rave scene to date, and focuses on how the scene changed and in her opinion, diminished considerably between 2002 and 2009. Ironically, shortly after, the scene exploded into a multi-billion dollar industry, but much of Anderson's analysis still remains relevant for analyzing facets of the EDM

scene today. I explain some components of the scene today using Anderson's explanation of the how the scene changed in Philadelphia, which she herself expands and claims to be emblematic of the US in general.

Commercialization is the central way the scene has changed since its height in the 1990s and early 2000s. As Anderson notes, the commercialization of music is prolific and well-documented, and usually explained through its inevitability in our capitalist system (Anderson 307-309). One way commercialization of rave culture happened was through the incorporation of raves into mainstream club culture. As we have seen, although raves started in clubs, in many ways they were anti-club, in that they were pro-dancing and pro-communalism. However, club owners began to see the opportunity of raves to make money for their venues, and started moving raves to their more legitimate and legal spaces. In Anderson's words, the incorporation of raves into clubs "fundamentally altered rave culture: it positioned the scene's ethos closer to 'corporate' principles that Gen X ravers had rejected. Profiteering and PLUR are very strange bedfellows" (Anderson 319). The competitive, individualistic nature of moneymaking did not interact with the values of sharing and acceptance of PLUR and rave culture.

Along with this came what I call the celebritization of the DJ. Prior to the late 2000s, Anderson notes, "In early rave culture, DJing was more egalitarian: DJs traded off with each other, played for similar amounts of time [...] were largely a faceless group with collective goals, such as musical enlightenment, taking fans on journeys, and keeping them dancing" (Anderson 320). However, when raves moved to clubs and began to be more popular among the mainstream, DJing became a higher art form and a profession. Because there was more advanced equipment and the potential to make more money, rave DJs started becoming legitimate music artists involved in the industry. Clubs used "headliners," or well-known EDM artists, to attract

more people to their events, and big names started to emerge as popular. But fees to see these celebrity DJs increased, preventing once-active and lower class ravers from attending these shows. Seeing a superstar DJ play became a main focus of attending an event, more than participating in the interactive rave community where the DJ was only one component aiding the experience (Anderson 321). The more egalitarian and agenda-less ethos of rave DJs began to dissipate.

The scene has grown both in scope and in commercialization since Anderson wrote in 2009. As Anderson was the most recent academic to analyze rave culture, an analysis of the causes of EDM's popularity in the last five or so years has potential as a topic for future academic literature in this area. That being said, news articles have addressed reasons for the surge. Simon Reynolds writes that raves declined around the late 2000s due to government control and suppression; "rave" became a dirty word that would doom promoters or event holders from the start ("How Raves" Reynolds). Those still committed to providing the experience of massives that were popular in the US had to rebrand raves as tame, and well, not raves. Thus they were remade into so-called festivals, and shed the association with many elements of the scene, such as drug paraphernalia and Kandi. In an attempt to become legitimized, promoters stopped throwing events in warehouses and instead took them to established sites like football fields and stadiums. The breakthrough in EDM's "bid for respectability," Reynolds argues, was Electric Daisy Carnival (EDC) 2010, when Pasquale Rotella, the brains behind the event, held EDC at the Coliseum in Los Angeles ("How Rave"). This attempt at wider acceptance almost failed horrifically, when a 15-year-old girl snuck in (the age restriction was 16) and died at the event after overdosing on Ecstasy. Twistedly enough, the

media attention from this fatality helped the scene explode into the enormous productions and festivals of today (“How Rave”).

Today, as the scene has become more ubiquitous, it is undoubtedly demographically mainstream, as seen by data from my Qualtrics survey. Out of 165 respondents, the majority listen to big room house, a popular house subgenre, or EDM on Billboard’s Top 40 (51%)¹, with 47% listening to trap, one of the more popular genres as well. 78% cite festivals, concerts with popular artists, and nightclubs hosting famous DJs as their primary events attended. My respondents are primarily not part of the underground scene. Therefore I assert that the demographics at least reflect the mainstream EDM scene, although there is sure to be variety depending on of which sub-scenes the respondents are a part.

The majority of respondents (55%) are between the ages of 21-24, with the second highest percentage (28%) being 18-20. Although not as young as it was at its peak, the EDM scene is clearly still a young people’s scene. The participants are majority male (60%), but much less so than other popular subcultures such as punks, who were almost exclusively male (Hebdige 83). This is at least partially explained by the themes of community, openness, and the playful and colorful aesthetic that makes the scene more traditionally feminine than masculine. Regarding sexual orientation, respondents were overwhelmingly straight (85%), with the others self-identifying as bisexual, gay, pansexual, queer, “heteroflexible,” or “heterosexual with curiosities.” The scene is also overwhelmingly white (70%), followed by Asian (18%) who account for a disproportionately high number of members compared to the general population (4.8%) (Humes et al).² Latin@s make up 11% of the scene, and Black, Pacific Islander/Native

¹ Big room house and the EDM on Top 40 are essentially synonymous, so I combined them in my survey.

² See Hunt et al’s chapter on Asian American youth in the rave scene in their book *Youth, Drugs, and Nightlife* for more on Asian American experiences and reasons for participating in rave; however, there is certainly room for more literature in this area.

Hawaiian, American Indian, and Other account for 2% or less each; all these races are slightly underrepresented (Humes et al). Most of the respondents are currently in college (54%), with college graduates being the second most prevalent members of the scene (32%). Only one respondent had not finished high school. The scene is dominated by the mainstream, those who hold dominant identities in the United States: white, heterosexual, college-educated, middle to upper class males. However, this does not mark a significant change from the scene at its height; if anything, the scene has become more diverse with the growth in Asian American participation (Hutson 36).

As it changed, the scene has fragmented, two central ways being by venue and music. As Anderson notes, genres of electronic dance music split, and as they did so, their venues did as well (327). Festivals, once called massives, are the bulk of the EDM scene. They are usually weekend-long, two or three day events, hosting anywhere from 20,000 to over 100,000 people. It would be difficult to find an EDM festival that cost under \$100, and they can be up to \$500. Add transportation, lodging, food, and (usually) drugs, and one event can cost upwards of \$1,000. After the death at EDC in 2010, festivals now only allow ages 18 and up. These factors contribute to the demographic of festivals being mostly white, upper-middle-class college students: the definition of the mainstream.

The extent to which festivals constitute a culture varies by promoter and host. For instance, HARD events in Los Angeles, hosted by Gary Richards (also known as Destructo), intentionally distance themselves from all elements that could be construed as rave-like. HARD does not allow Kandi, LED lights, or pacifiers at their events; Richards has called these elements of the scene “silly stuff” (“How Rave” Reynolds). HARD wants to be called and thought of as a music festival, just like any other music festival of any other genre. Despite these attempts, going

to HARD is anything but normal. Anecdotally speaking, most people come dressed in elaborate costumes, and the majority of people at the event have dilated pupils and clenched jaws (effects of MDMA). One attendee I saw at a HARD event had a sign declaring, “This air is like, THE BEST AIR,” a nod to the pleasurable tactile sensations rendered by MDMA.

Other festivals, such as those put on by Insomniac, embrace the elements of rave culture and intentionally try to keep the scene interactive, experiential, and PLUR-filled. Once a raver himself, Pasquale Rotella emphasizes that EDM festivals are more than just a music festival; they are an “experience,” a “fantasy” world (“How Rave” Reynolds). His events boast larger-than-life decorations of animals, flowers, and the like, wanting the experience to be a complete “sensory overload” (“How Rave” Reynolds). These events explicitly encourage Kandi, costume-wearing, and LED lights. Along with these cultural signs come cultural rituals, such as tutting and gloving, which are dances performed by one’s hands and enhanced by gloves that light up at the tips of one’s fingers. Audience members give each other what are called “light shows” during the set. This ritual emerged from the glow stick craze during 1990s raves. Rotella understands that this interactive aspect of the scene is what gives it its uniqueness, saying, “Without the people, it's nothing [...] The day it turns into just a concert, I'm not going to be inspired anymore” (“How Rave” Reynolds). To counteract the celebrity DJ phenomenon, Insomniac events present a list of their lineup with the same phrase at the bottom: “And the most important headliner – YOU.”

Although Insomniac focuses on its audience, they still pull some of the biggest names in EDM, as do other events of its scope. These big names are artists who play mostly electro house, a style of house emerging in the early 2000s and now coming to typify the general conception of EDM. It should be noted that “EDM,” although technically an umbrella term for all

electronically produced dance music, implies electro house and other more commercial or popular forms of electronic dance music (i.e., deep house would not commonly be considered EDM, although it technically is). To musically purist electronic dance music fans, “EDM” is a somewhat dirty word, implying the uncreative, soulless, capitalistic styles of the genre. Although electro house draws on the four-on-the-floor elements of house music, it also features more soaring and melodic synths, and sometimes contains lyrics. Electro house also often features drops, or long buildups with short, repetitive symbols or hi-hats, releasing into a booming, heavy bass and pounding melody.³

The most popular form of electro house is big room house, a phenomenon that has just taken off in the last couple of years. This style of house has a more poppy, commercial sound, sugary-sweet synths and chord progressions, and a more traditional lyrics-chorus-lyrics song format than other electronic dance music, which is compromised mostly of “tracks” for the purposes of spinning them together seamlessly into a set. Big room has been a cause for much controversy about commercialization and creativity in the EDM scene, which I will discuss more in depth below. Big room artists include Martin Garrix, Calvin Harris, and Dimitri Vegas. The largest festivals often bring big room and electro house as their headliners, but also make space for subgenres such as trap, deep house, and techno. That being said, festivals still tend to pull the most mainstream and profitable artists from EDM.

There are two other main venues for the scene with their corresponding genres: the nightclub and concert scene, host to mainly lesser-known techno, deep house and tech house artists, and the true underground rave culture, which hosts local artists who usually specialize in hardstyle and hardcore. However, because the festival scene is the largest, most ubiquitous, and

³ For an example of a popular electro house drop, see “Cannonball” by Showtek & Justin Prime: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZwOVOSi-5nc>

most critiqued for its corruption of rave culture, I focus on festivals and their music genres in my analysis. A more comprehensive breakdown of the contemporary sub-scenes and their elements could be a topic of future research.

As the scene has become fragmented and its largest fragment, the festival scene, has become extremely commercialized, many argue what I call the EDM-ization of rave culture has at best, distorted, and at worst, completely corrupted rave culture into exactly what it was fighting against: commercialization, profit, greed, competition, music without soul, and people without an investment in the culture. Old ravers, current artists, bloggers, and academics alike point to aspects of the new scene that directly contradict the tenants of old rave culture that made it into the unique subculture it was.

One of the biggest controversies is that of the artist-vs-DJ. As I have outlined, from the beginnings of the house scene in the late 1980s to the trance scene of the 2000s, the DJ's artistry was measured by how well s/he could choose and blend tracks so the partygoers continued dancing for hours. This was central to experience of raves; the DJ took ravers on a journey and enhanced the feelings of collectivity and ecstasy through dance—elements that made the culture subversive and counter to hegemonic ideology. Today, the artists and producers that dominate the scene are heavily critiqued for their inability to construct a set. In the most infamous controversy, deadmau5 was slammed in 2012 after his “we all hit play” tumblr post, in which he admitted he does virtually nothing “live” during his live sets; he plays out his prerecorded tracks with an intricate light show to accompany it. This spurred responses from popular EDM artists such as Swedish House Mafia, Afrojack, and A-Trak, who defended their respective commitment to the art of DJing, and also slammed the unoriginal sets from those like deadmau5 who do simply press play. A-Trak stated in his Huffington Post article, “This scene is turning

into a caricature. Explosions, private jets, standing on tables [...] and now carbon copy playlists... [...] EDM risks devaluing a culture that has waited for its big break for 30 years.” A-Trak sees these mainstream artists as distorting original, more creative rave culture.

Similarly, creativity (or lack thereof) is another central critique of modern EDM culture. Older, more established artists and other EDM enthusiasts chastise electro house, especially big room, for being unoriginal and predictable. One Soundcloud user, Daleri, created a compilation entitled “Epic Mashleg,” consisting of several drops of Beatport Top 100 EDM songs that sound eerily alike, in order to reveal their lack of originality. Creativity is a mark of subcultural authenticity; artists create outside of the norm to produce something different from the mainstream. By definition, the mainstream is characterized by sameness, the reproduction of values, norms, and products for easy consumption by the masses (Moore 250). When all EDM songs begin to sound the same, those in the original subculture use it as evidence of the disintegration of the culture and its absorption into the mainstream. In an interview with Rolling Stone, dubstep artist Bassnectar says,

There are big name DJs right now who buy their own Facebook followers and manufacture their profiles and don't write their music, have other people write their music for them and then don't play their music live, but stand there during prerecorded sets while they run around onstage and congratulate themselves [...] EDM is so easy to critique because most of the biggest and most successful artists are the phoniest.

This critique of inauthentic and ego-driven DJs stems from the valuation of a culture that once was improvisational and egoless, with faceless, nameless DJs taking the stage and mixing sets live. As Moore describes, authenticity as measured by distance from and rebellion of the mainstream, is a central value in subcultures. When underground music becomes commoditized, or made solely for profit or popularity as Bassnectar describes, those in the subculture decry artists who “sell out” and lament the loss of authenticity that goes along with it. EDM artists who

have changed their sound—for example, Showtek (hardstyle to Top 40), Above & Beyond (epic trance to electro), and Tiesto (trance to Top 40/electro/pop)—are prime targets for former die-hard fans and ravers.⁴ Selling out, or signing to a large record label, and changing one’s sound to be more consumer-friendly and profitable, is the epitome of disloyalty to the subculture. Not only is it appealing to the mainstream, but it is buying in (literally) to American capitalism, privileging money over music and meaning. For its critics, the more EDM artists “sell out,” the less subcultural it becomes.

Probably the most scathing critiques are of the fans themselves and their new EDM culture, or lack thereof. Many of these critiques hone in on the fact that EDM now caters to the mindless masses, blind consumers who only want more in-your-face, larger-than-life stimulation, and could not care less what type of music is playing as long as they are intoxicated and partying with their friends. Pure hedonism, then, becomes the critiqued. For example, “The ‘drop’ has become an indicator of crass vulgarity, both in the sense of being commercially popular and in the sense of being something for the [...] masses” (Bogart). There is a sense that EDM has been “dumbed down,” as one article calls it, to appeal to those who want to “lose their shit” or break out in dance instead of analyze or appreciate a set’s musicality or a DJ’s talent (Fusilli; Bogart).

Seth Troxler, an underground techno artist, delivered a comprehensive breakdown of the reasons he hates the mainstream EDM scene: “We’re breeding a generation of impatient, annoying festival kids. I say impatient because the patience of the clubber is different to the patience of the festivalgoer. At these festivals, you get it all on a platter up-front. Lasers! LED screens! Pyrotechnics! DROPS! Boom! Bang! CAKE IN YOUR FUCKING FACE! [A

⁴ See YouTube comments on Showtek’s track with Spinnin’ Records, “We Like To Party,” for example: “Showtek was a hardstyle god, now he is mainstream shit!!,” or the Reddit.com/r/aves post, “Can we talk about Tiesto for a second?”

reference to Steve Aoki's sets where he flings 12" cakes into the crowd]" (Troxler). For Troxler, there is virtue in the slow and subtle builds of house, techno, and trance, where drops are not as important as the journey the music takes its listeners on. The vast majority of EDM scene members I interviewed cited people, many times identified as white, college-attending men, or "frat bros," who "go to get fucked up" and "don't care about the music" as their least favorite aspects of the scene and as contributing to its disintegration (Various interviews). As the scene starts to appeal to the most mainstream American (read: upper-middle class white male), these ravers argue that rave culture's values of acceptance, love of difference, and the unity of people from all walks of life become threatened. The impatient, intoxicated "festival kid" that Troxler and these EDM fans criticize is a symptom of the hedonistic side of capitalism, the consumer who is never satisfied and always seeking immediate gratification without deeper meaning. In essence, it is a critique of mainstream American culture, or at least one side of it.

Many argue that raves are now devoid of their subcultural elements due to commercialization. However, I challenge this, arguing EDM culture maintains and develops its subcultural elements as it undergoes change, giving hope for real and further transformation of hegemonic cultural values as it enters and is consumed by the mainstream.

First, the arguments against the mindless, hedonistic partiers of the new scene are conservative, not subversive. They advocate for the delayed gratification and patience of the Puritanical side of capitalism, where Americans work for hours for the later monetary payoff. They also inadvertently critique rave culture from the 1990s and 2000s, which was full of hedonistic pleasure-seeking and the drive for more—this is what created the ultra-fast, aggressive hardstyle and hardcore genres that became emblematic of US rave culture (Reynolds 144-145). Sensory overstimulation has always been part and parcel of the rave scene: vibrating

bass, strobe lights, and MDMA defined the scene in the US since the early 1990s. Rave scene's celebration of the body over the mind made it the subculture it was, and it still continues today.

The over-the-top fashion at mainstream EDM events most obviously upholds Barthes' signs and Hebdige's style necessary for subculture. I use Electronic Daisy Carnival, or EDC, as a case study for mainstream EDM events, as it is by far the largest EDM festival; it has been described as "Rave Mecca" and "the Christmas of Insomniac events" by my interviewees. It serves as a microcosm for the scene. At EDC, bright neon colors, bras and short shorts for women, fuzzy boots, glitter, and fishnets are the norm. Many female interviewees described the desire express themselves extravagantly at EDC, commenting, "If I was going to get wacky [...] it should be at EDC," and "I wanted to be really 'out there.'" Some had costumes, such as dressing up as Jasmine from Aladdin, or a "Rave America" outfit. Outside of EDC, interviewees expressed the same sentiment: "I like wearing things that make a statement such as an LED light up jacket that I wore to SnowGlobe [a EDM festival in Lake Tahoe]." Dressing up is a central part of the experience of going to EDC and other festivals. One female interviewee commented that half the fun was planning and preparing for the outfit months before the event, saying, "It's definitely a form of expression."

The new EDM culture took the big and bright aspects of old rave culture and expanded it. The fashion draws attention to while simultaneously revealing the body; a hand-stitched, sequined bra is a common and fitting example of this. Far from the Puritan rigidity of the business suit, rave gear is purposefully flashy, revealing, and celebratory of the body. Interviewees' desires to stand out and be "wacky" further reflect the idea of EDM culture as a space to subvert normal life. A female interviewee said her motivation to wear her rave gear was as an "escape," and because it is something she "would never wear in any other context." These

outfits serve as an opportunity to play with alternate modes of expression and to express a style strikingly opposite everyday cultural norms.

Although a central critique of EDM culture is its eager, mindless sensory overload, using mind-body dualism and elements of 90s rave culture, today's scene constitutes a strongly subversive component against the cult of lofty rationality and self-restraint. The argument that many have made that mainstream EDM is for the undiscerning consumer masses who seek constant new forms of pleasure is a conservative argument. It advocates for the delayed gratification and patience of the Puritanical side of capitalism, where Americans work for hours for the later monetary payoff. It also inadvertently critiques rave culture from the 1990s and 2000s, which was full of hedonistic pleasure-seeking and the drive for more—this is what created the ultra-fast, aggressive hardstyle and hardcore genres that became emblematic of US rave culture. Sensory overstimulation has always been part and parcel of the rave scene: vibrating bass, strobe lights, and MDMA defined the scene since the STORMraves of the 1990s. As I have outlined, rave scene's celebration of the body over the mind made it the subculture it was, and still is.

Most emblematic of this focus on the body is the sensory overload these mainstream festivals aim for, especially EDC. Pasquale Rotella, the founder of Insomniac and promoter of EDC, stated that he wants EDC to be “an adult Disneyland,” a “Wonderland” (“How Rave” Reynolds). Indeed, EDC is equipped with 60-foot owls that move and shoot lasers, a giant ferris wheel, fireworks, and enormous intricately decorated stages. His intention is to submerge the attendees in a sensory experience. Off of the comments of those I interviewed, he succeeds. One male interviewee said his favorite part of EDC are “the sub-woofers,” a nod to the powerful bass they create that listeners literally *feel* inside their chest, making music a physical experience

rather than an intellectual one (Jowels 385). My interviewees describe EDC as a “the ultimate spectacle,” “one of the craziest, most insane gatherings I’ve ever known to exist,” and because of the production value, it is an “unbelievable experience, like nothing you’re ever going to experience in your entire life.” One female interviewee said it stimulates “all the senses; just—It’s spectacular.” This focus on stimulating the body, so much so that attendees find difficulty finding the right words to describe it apart from superlatives, proves mainstream festivals as subversive to the Puritan American value of the mind and of self-composure. In addition, it is noteworthy that sensory overload is the *intention* of EDC; it is set up to be outside the scope of everyday life, where people must be composed and rational.

Interviewees testify to this escape from normal society and creation of a hedonistic world at EDC and mainstream EDM events. A female interviewee stated, “Walking into the arena the first time took my breath away. I had never seen anything so magnificently laid out to be a playground for freedom.” Again, we see the intentionality of creating a space that celebrates freedom, not in the traditional American sense, but likening freedom to that of a playground, a time when one did not have responsibilities and could explore the sensory world. The description of EDC as a “playground” parallels the childlike elements of the subversive rave scene in the 1990s as well.

Besides a playground, EDC is also a party. A 23-year-old white male said of EDC, “It’s a party, it’s fun, and it’s crazy, and that does demonstrate who we are as a community.” His connection of the hedonistic values of pleasure and party and the sense of community suggest the EDM culture is one of intentionally fostering these subversive values within a concrete community. EDM culture proves subcultural in that it intentionally and consistently creates a space that values and centers partying and fun. The same interviewee stated his favorite part of

the experience is, “The lift-off from reality and the week of vacation from real life and the social boundaries that keep me a part of typical American society.” EDC dissolves the restrictive norms of US society by creating a so-called vacation space that inverts the American value of the mind for the value of the body. We can infer that the “typical American society” he speaks of is that of work, discipline, and the separation of people into hierarchies (given his statement on “social boundaries.”) Notably, this interviewee is a white, college-educated, straight male. Although he perfectly fits into hegemonic American culture, he finds freedom and worth in EDC’s values that reflect the opposite of the culture he actively participates in. EDC’s valuation of the body successfully opened up a demographically mainstream American citizen to completely new values and ways of experiencing reality. That is subversive in a way a smaller subculture never could be, because those holding dominant identities and operating within the mainstream would never have accessed the scene and adopted its values if it had not met them where they already were.

In addition to the sensory and Dionysian party atmosphere, EDM culture and its participants value the body through dancing and EDM music. Many interviewees cite dancing as central to their experience and love for EDM culture. One Hispanic male stated, “My main reason [for attending EDM events] is for the music. I just fucking love it and it’s the best feeling in the world to let loose for the night and dance to some groovy beats. It’s like an escape for me.” The music that enables him to dance leads him to describe his experience as an escape. Feeling into his body through the music and dancing, allowing him to play with imposed boundaries and “let loose,” is experienced as a break from normal life. This description maps on to a re-valuation of the body over the everyday valuation of the mind, confirming EDM’s subversive culture.

Others point to signs or rituals that facilitate dancing. One female says she wears “comfortable shoes to dance in for 5-6 hours at a time.” Like the baggy pants of the 1990s that were used primarily because they were easy to dance in, comfortable shoes become necessary at EDM events because they allow attendees to dance. Comfortable shoes, in contrast to, say, the stiff or even painful leather shoes and high heels of professional life, become signs for the valuation of the body at EDM events. Drugs also continue to be subversive signs for the centrality of the body. One woman stated, “Lately I’ve been [...] taking Adderall (for the energy boost because we generally [...] dance all day at these things).” A 20-year-old male stated he uses MDMA “to keep me going through long days or sets where I know I’ll be dancing for 8+ hours.” The stimulating, amphetamine effects of Adderall and MDMA facilitate the all-night dancing at EDM events. These drugs become subcultural signs for the focus on the body and are subversive in and of themselves given American condemnation of all illicit substances.

In addition, while MDMA was the drug of choice for raves at their height and became a sign for elements of the scene associated with the spirit, love, acceptance, and unity, the drug is still widely used in the EDM scene today. 80% of survey respondents report they have taken MDMA at least once at an EDM event, while 58% say they typically consume the drug at such events. Although the numbers are slightly higher for alcohol, this suggests that even as the scene has become commercialized and alcohol became more common because of this, EDM culture still maintains the subversive sign of MDMA as a central element of the experience.

Furthermore, the spiritual meaning behind MDMA during the scene’s height in 1990s still continues today, even separate from the drug itself. Many interviewees report feelings of complete euphoria, loss of self, and unity with others through the music and environment at large EDM festivals. Almost all interviewees, when asked to describe their favorite memory at an

EDM event, speak to a certain type of euphoric peak, and cite a specific song that catalyzed this experience. For example:

One of the happiest moments of my life was at Tomorrowworld 2013 during Axwell's set. It was close to the end of his set and he was playing a remix of ["Don't You Worry Child[" [...] I was with all of my friends dancing and it was just an extremely happy, euphoric time [...] There's just something about being happy, being with your friends who are also happy, and then being with about 50,000 other people who are feeling the same thing. It's really amazing. (Female, white, 24)

Although TomorrowWorld takes place in Europe, the interviewee is active in the EDM scene in the United States, and TomorrowWorld is one of the biggest EDM festivals and brings some of the mostly widely recognized DJs and artists. She cites the feeling of euphoria generated by a certain song and the feeling of sharing in happiness with thousands of others. This parallels the euphoric peaks Rietveld explains as central to house music in the early 1990s: "At that moment, there is no separate inside or outside world; there is simply a sense of being 'here' at the present" (Rietveld 195). Her repetition of the word "happy" to describe herself, her friends, and then 50,000 strangers suggests a sense of a loss of self as defined by difference, drawing a connection to the ego loss induced by dancing to house music two decades prior: "With the disappearance of a sense of 'the other' (i.e. what is not oneself and therefore considered outside of it), a sense of self also disappears, since 'the self' is defined by its sense of difference" (Rietveld 194). This dissolving of traditional boundaries and ego reflect ideas of communality where the Western conceptualization of the individual, separate self is dismantled. This leave space for unity and connection that could aid groups in creating a liberating space in a society that depends on separation and difference for the maintenance of hierarchies (Marx; DuBois 721-723). This remains subversive against a society that functions through hierarchies, separation, and individuality.

Other EDM culture participants have strikingly similar descriptions of their favorite moments at these events. One describes her euphoric moment at EDC:

Swedish House Mafia, 2011 [...] They were playing “One.” I was on my friend’s shoulders, and the entire crowd seems to be moving in unison, like we’re all “One” [laughs] [...] You’re in a sea of 10,000 people and you just look around, and you’re just like [...] this is the most spectacular feeling, you can’t really describe it. It’s just something, like, I don’t even know how to explain it, it’s, like, something like, um... [pause] Like this, ah, I don’t know how to explain it, like nothing you’d ever experience in any other context [...] Almost like it’s not really real [...] The sheer amount of energy in the crowd that you can feel and we’re all together and we’re all just dancing together [...] and the lights and the music [...] and you’re just like, “This is the best moment of my life.” (Female, white, 21)

This festivalgoer’s inability to articulate what happened in the moment demonstrates how it bypasses cognition and becomes mere experience: bodily and spiritual. Sensory overload helps to de-intellectualize the experience; her rushed and overwhelmed explanation of the music, lights, and people together culminate in the general feeling that “This is the best moment of my life.” Lastly, she emphasizes the sense of togetherness she feels with everyone dancing, speaking to the communalistic aspect of EDM that continues from raves of the 1990s. This creation of a community where everyone is in harmony gives this interviewee the sense that the experience is “not real.” This perfectly reflects Rietveld’s description of the community created in house clubs of the late 1980s: “This is a moment of a ‘perfect’ community [...] one could call this an experience of a type of ‘hyperreality’ which is difficult to express in words” (192). Clearly paralleling the subcultural aspects of older raves, this EDC attendee’s experience also attests to the creation of a community in which normal social boundaries have disappeared in favor of a collective, harmonious unit.

Her sense of connection between the song the DJ is playing and the experience of the moment, through the title “One,” represents an example of the DJ-as-shaman that Reynolds describes at Paradise Garage in New York during the 1980s, where the DJ chooses the perfect

track to help dancers reach moments of spiritual ecstasy (Reynolds 35). It suggests the dynamic and fluid interaction between DJ, dancer, dance floor, and music, existing in a feedback loop; it is impossible to tell if the track *created* the peak experience, or bolstered an experience that was already present. Regarding this, Ferreira asks rhetorically, “What is the meaning of attributing causality to DJs *or* audience, humans *or* machines, sound *or* movement, when they are all different manifestations of one common machinic reality of mutual implication?” (19). All these elements function harmoniously to create a feeling of unity as the EDC attendee described.

The celebrity DJ has been criticized as destroying the sense of community and interaction between DJ and audience because they become the spectacle to be watched instead of the facilitator of an experience (Anderson 321). Swedish House Mafia was one of the highest-paid EDM groups in 2014, and “One” was on the Billboard Top Dance Club Songs in 2010 (Greenburg; Billboard). However, they still participated in the organic interaction and facilitated the euphoric peak of its audience that was so cherished during the rave scene’s height. One of the highest-grossing EDM groups at the largest EDM festival in the world helped its audience feel a sense of unity and oneness with others and their environment. The spiritually and communally subversive aspects of the old rave culture successfully have carried into even the most mainstream of spaces.

The most powerful subversive element of the contemporary EDM scene is the culture of acceptance and its fostering of communalism. Among all interviewees, this was the most cited element of EDM culture and foundational to what made the scene special. In the studies and interviews I researched on early raves, although this was an element of the scene, it was not as prominent or explicit as it is today. One participant simply stated that at EDM events, “There is not the judgment [...] that you may feel outside in normal society.” While asserting that these

events constitute a culture outside of everyday life, she also emphasizes that traditional barriers that keep people separate—judgment, discrimination—do not appear in EDM culture. A female EDC attendee said of her experience there:

Never in my life had I felt so...allowed. I was allowed to wear whatever I wanted, I was allowed to act however I wanted [...] I was allowed to be whoever I really wanted to be. It was liberating and exciting and you could feel that everyone there felt the same and wanted you to be you too.

EDC creates a completely new context in which its participants operate. Far from everyday society, where social boundaries dictate how to behave, EDC fosters a culture of freedom, where people are encouraged to experiment with different ways of being. The interviewee also speaks to a sense of being allowed to be her true self, without the restrictions placed on her by American society. In this sense, EDC also becomes a spiritual space that allows the soul, conceptualized as pure and untainted by society, to be expressed. The same interviewee asserted that EDC is a microcosm of EDM culture at large, even calling it rave culture to connect it to the same values present during the 90s: “EDC is a major representation of rave culture. Rave culture is about inclusion and acceptance. There’s no question about that to me, based on my experiences.”

Others describe the strong sense of community between members of the scene. A 19-year-old white female said, “Anyone who listens to EDM is automatically accepted as part of the EDM ‘scene.’ We’re one big family – that’s how it’s always been and how it always will be.” EDM culture becomes a way to bring people together under shared experience and values, making normal social boundaries less apparent. Her statement also suggests she feels that EDM culture has kept the PLUR (Peace, Love, Unity, Respect) element of rave culture from the 1990s, and this will continue into the future even as the scene changes. One woman stated, “There is also a strong camaraderie among the attendees. Everyone likes making friends with each other, even if it’s only for the duration of the show.” EDM events foster a sense of unity and safety that

allows people to be open and friendly to each other. The fact that these friendships do not always last outside of the event speaks to the special and subcultural environment EDM events create that does not exist in other contexts. This subcultural value is some of the participants' favorite aspect of the scene. One Asian male explained,

Every time you make a connection with a random stranger is a fond experience. That connection where you're both connected to the music, dancing, and then you make eye contact. That eye contact connects you and the other person together with the music and so many times no words are exchanged, you just dance there with them for a time. Those moments are my favorite.

The environment of dancing to music together allows for the wordless, unintellectual or rational connection between strangers. Even a brochure for HARD Summer, an EDM event that has explicitly attempted to de-rave itself, reads, "Dance with friends, new and old!" HARD acknowledges that EDM culture is friendly and people are open to meeting new people. It would be difficult to find another mainstream space in American society where getting to know those around you is explicitly encouraged, given the capitalistic competition, values of individualism, and increasing isolation felt by Americans (Tomlinson 195-211). Feelings of friendship, connection, and a desire to interact with others were central to the rave scene in the 1990s, and are central even to the mainstream scene now. Given American individualism, EDM culture is subversive in its openness and connection to others.

Beyond friendliness, which could be dismissed as superficial, members of the culture speak to the ways they see the values of PLUR (Peace, Love, Unity, and Respect) at EDM events. One woman says simply, "People are very respectful of each other," upholding the fourth word in the rave motto. Another, when asked if she saw discrimination at events, said:

I feel like the very few times there has been any form of discrimination the crowd generally gives people a hard time [...] People often let go at these events so you'll experience a lot of extreme personalities, and I think that's why PLUR [...] emerged as a culture, to allow attendees to be comfortable and be nice to one

another because they're in an environment with lots of strangers and you have to learn to tolerate everything in order to have a good time and make the experience a good one for everyone involved.

Besides showcasing the feelings of freedom and acceptance at EDM events, she speaks to the ways the culture makes this free space safe and sustainable, through the values of PLUR. Like in the 1990s, attendees hold a mutual agreement to respect and support each other as they express themselves during events. Slightly under half of those I interviewed cited PLUR in their experience of EDM events and what drew them initially to the scene, demonstrating that subcultural value has not been completely lost to the new generation.

Kandi, the beaded bracelets people exchange with each other at raves and now some EDM events, is a subcultural sign of the values of PLUR. Although Kandi has been banned at many events, such as HARD, it is encouraged at EDC, proving some mainstream EDM spaces—indeed, the biggest EDM event in the world—still embrace rave subculture. One white male EDC attendee said at the event, “Kandi is always encouraged! I’ve never seen a downtrend in kandi.” Another perfectly demonstrates how a simple inanimate object becomes pregnant with meaning in the context of EDM culture:

Kandi itself is a really sacred thing. I can walk into my close [sic] right now, pull out my bundle of bracelets, and tell you a story about each one. [...] It’s a bunch of childish beads on stretchy string, yes, but it’s a way to bond with your peers, it’s a way to collect stories.

Because it represents connection to others and marks memories and a history within EDM culture, she describes Kandi as “sacred,” making it a symbol for the spiritual and religious experience of the EDM event. Kandi was and still is a sign of the subcultural motto of PLUR in EDM culture.

It can be argued that EDM culture holds little subversive potential because of its transitory nature; events appear, exist for a few days at most, and then disappear. I argue this

does not limit its power as a catalyst for culture change, drawing on Melechi's theory that raves' subcultural value in part stems from their "collective disappearance" from the everyday world to create a more positive and idyllic version of reality (Melechi 29). In addition to this argument, however, I found many interviewees who assert that EDM culture has positively impacted their life. One Hispanic male stated, "I love electronic music and it is the best thing that has ever happened to my life. It has made me more open and part of something great which I am thankful for." Far from being a temporary escape from reality, this participant feels he has changed for the better due to his experience in the scene. An EDC attendee said of the EDM scene in general, "This whole world has been very good to me. It saved me, in its own way. Through dance and music and awareness and friends I'm a better, stronger person." Again, the creation of an alternate "world," as she calls it, has carried on into her everyday life and improved her sense of self. Most impactful was one young woman's assertion that the scene literally saved her life:

I had anxiety problems that affected me [sic] social life. [...] I shut [feelings] off as a coping mechanism [...] As soon as I discovered the full scope of the EDM scene (not just the music, but the people and the shows and the festivals) my anxiety began to disappear [...] I started to learn to love myself no matter my previous mistakes or flaws. I no longer feel lost or helpless because I know there will always be a place I can call "home" and people I can call my "family" [...] I can't tell you how many times I would've died or cried myself to sleep [...] if I hadn't gotten into EDM and started to feel things. Now when music brings me to tears I'm thrilled, because it means that I've opened up some very vulnerable parts of myself and it's been so, so therapeutic for me. I can't even explain how blessed I am to have had this opportunity to be a part of this family.

Although she states in her interview that she mostly participates in the less mainstream scene, at house parties and some concerts, I feel compelled to share her story as it reflects how powerful the scene still is and how the values of unconditional love, acceptance, and a privileging of the body and spirit over the intellectual run deep, and affect participants' lives in a very real way. It

is impossible to write off today's EDM culture as superficial and meaningless given these stories.

I must address, however, the overwhelming feeling of my interviewees that the scene is changing for the worse, and that as it becomes more commercialized, more people enter the scene who are not as deeply connected to its values. Many cite the mainstream college students, labeled as “frat bros and sorority girls,” who only want to go to “get messed up” and are “not really caring about the music.” Because they come from outside the scene and do not understand or care to understand its values, one interviewee says, “The heart of the culture (PLUR) [...] has been lost on a lot of people.” This, in turn, leaves many feeling that the popularization of EDM has “lessened the general PLUR vibe that was prevalent among these events.” Some cite that these attendees are more focused on pushing through the crowd to see a celebrity DJ than they are to dancing, showing a disintegration of subcultural elements of the scene. Others observed that Kandi has become less popular. A female EDC-goer notes that a few years ago, Kandi was like a badge of honor; the more Kandi one had, the more experienced and worthy of respect a raver was. However, now, she said she does not see Kandi trading happening very often, if at all, at EDM events. The decrease in the prevalence of Kandi marks a loss in an important subcultural sign and decreases EDM culture's subversive potential. These interviewees see the commercialization of EDM culture as a negative phenomenon.

However, it is of note that almost every interviewee cites a different year or time they felt the community's values, like PLUR, decrease. One EDC attendee says after 2009, the scene changed so that he no longer felt connected to it. He described as an experience where “you leave your problems at the door and you feel alive,” but after 2009, “People have their guards up.” However, another participant said that EDC 2011 was the best event of her entire life, but

afterwards it was not the same and not as friendly. A raver from the 1990s asserted that 2003, the year after the RAVE Act, was when the scene turned. As the scene changes and evolves and loses some of its elements, it also holds on to them so new ravers can experience them; there is no firm date of which we can declare the death of the scene's subcultural values. Although some people have tapered off their attendance at events for reasons related to the change in the scene, many still participate and find benefits to the scene despite their recognition of its changing landscape. Many shared conflicting opinions about its wonderful subcultural qualities and the escape from reality it gives them, while also sharing feels of frustration about those who participate but are not as invested in the scene's culture.

I want to lift up the possibility that as the scene becomes mainstream, inevitably it will become diluted by those who do not adopt or care to adopt its core values. However, the fact that all the people I interviewed still asserted their love for the scene, had positive and insightful comments about EDM culture, and did not simply say they attended to party for a night, shows the culture is still maintained by these very people who continue to attend and contribute to the culture they love. It is to be expected that the culture will become jeopardized as it enters the mainstream. However, I have outlined the ways in which even a mainstream event like EDC creates a space that celebrates the body, the spirit, and the message of PLUR, even if some participants do not explicitly embrace this culture. I am hopeful about EDM culture's potential to bring its subversive elements into mainstream culture without being completely diluted, and indeed have proven that it has done so already.

Another threat to the scene is its treatment of social identity and oppression. Spurring from the sense of acceptance is a sentiment among those in the scene that social identity, such as race, class, and gender, disappears in the context of the EDM event. One white male said, "The

EDM scene is very accepting and open to anyone who wishes to join it. Race doesn't matter, age doesn't matter, sex or sexuality don't matter. As long as you are there to have a good time people are there to help you succeed." Another said of EDC, "Once you're inside [the event], hierarchies between people dissipate because we're all there together." EDM becomes the common denominator, allowing traditional boundaries to be deemphasized. When applied to US society in general, these views represent a colorblind politics that erases historical discrimination against people of color and those with marginalized identities (Bonilla-Silva). Thus, the scene is far from a utopia given the social and political context it operates in.

In addition, participants cite instances of discrimination and oppression, mostly in the form of sexism, during EDM events. One woman who attended EDC said, "You couldn't really walk around without guys being like, 'Heeeyy, whatsup [...] you wanna take a picture?' It was just like, nonstop." She stopped wearing revealing clothing to EDC because of this unwanted attention. Another female interviewee remarked, "At a festival this past summer my best friend was wearing a crop top and some random guy came up to her and asked her when she was due. Rude things like that never used to happen. I blame it on the music becoming so popular." In this case, she attributes the sexism she witnessed to the mainstreaming of the scene and the infiltration of those who internalize American patriarchal and misogynistic dominant culture. Unfortunately, the mainstreaming of rave culture has increased instances of discrimination, especially sexual harassment, in contrast to the asexuality and childlike freedom of earlier raves.

Although the mainstream has changed rave culture, my argument still holds that rave culture has changed the mainstream. The same women who experienced sexism also talked about feeling the most euphoric and happiest they have ever been at EDM festivals, and reported feelings of ego loss through dance. A straight white male interviewee who wore an America-

themed costume to EDC and acknowledged people see him as a “redneck” also spoke of feeling outside of himself and escaping normal constrictive reality through EDM culture, saying EDC was a “liftoff from reality.” EDM culture, even at its most mainstream, has already begun to challenge fundamental American values around the mind, rationality, secularism, individualism, and competition.

This paper argues that, far from a complete dissolution of rave culture’s subcultural capital, the mainstreaming of rave into EDM culture has changed mainstream American values. The adoption of elements of rave culture—such as ethos of PLUR, ego loss through music and dance, sensory overload and bodily pleasure—by those in the mainstream and holding dominant social identities, is subversive and threatening to dominant American ideology, even more than the culture in the 1990s that mostly stuck to niche underground events. EDM culture indeed represents a challenge to dominant American ideology.

It will be interesting to see how the scene continues to evolve. It could implode, becoming so massive that it eventually bursts and dissolves, leaving only traces of the scene in its wake. It could become completely absorbed into the mainstream, and lose all its subcultural elements, so it is little more subversive than going to a bar or a nightclub. Or, it could continue to grow but still hold onto its elements, continually changing American values as it goes, and even changing the hearts and minds of those most deeply connected to mainstream culture. As I have shown, despite massive commercialization, interviewees attest to the positive transformative potential of rave culture. I am tempted to believe in the possibility that it continues to be a site of cultural transformation. But what would it take for this to occur? What are the ways in which the culture has sustained itself? Is it the music, the veterans of the scene, the rebels who continue to sneak in Kandi to HARD events, those who introduce their friends to the scene and teach them

its subcultural values along the way? How will ravers continue to hold onto the scene as local governments and event promoters attempt to control it? These are questions I have not investigated and will be interesting for future research.

Furthermore, a more in-depth analysis of social identity and intergroup relations within EDM culture is crucial to determining whether the scene could potentially transcend and transform oppression in the United States. The scene will have to adopt a more nuanced and critical view of social identity in order for this to occur. Research into the experiences in the scene or decisions to not participate in the scene by people with marginalized identities, such as people of color, queer people, or trans folk, could illuminate some of these dark spots within the literature on rave subculture. Finally, a focus on those who have just recently entered the scene—deemed by others as simply “frat bros” that do not care about what the scene has to offer—could further investigate the ability of the scene’s culture to transform even those most steeped in dominant American culture. For now, it is enough to say that sitting on the shoulders of their best friend, looking out over a sea of 50,000 smiling people, and feeling the bass of their favorite song vibrate in their chest, is the closest many of these EDM fans get to heaven.

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