

Rave Culture and Religion

Edited by
Graham St John

Routledge Advances in Sociology

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Rave Culture and Religion

Rave Culture and Religion explores the role of the technocultural rave in the spiritual life of contemporary youth. Documenting the sociocultural and religious parameters of rave and post-rave phenomena at various locations around the globe, scholars of contemporary religion, dance ethnologists, sociologists and other cultural observers unravel this significant youth cultural practice.

The collection provides insights on developments in post-traditional religiosity (especially 'New Age' and 'Neo-Paganism') through studies of rave's gnostic narratives of ascensionism and re-enchantment, explorations of the embodied spirituality and millennialist predispositions of dance culture, and investigations of transnational digital-art countercultures manifesting at geographic locations as diverse as Goa, India, north-eastern New South Wales, Australia and Nevada's Burning Man Festival. Contributors examine raving as a new religious or revitalization movement; a powerful locus of sacrifice and transgression; a lived bodily experience; a practice comparable with world entheogenic rituals; and as evidencing a new Orientalism. A range of technospiritual developments are explored, including:

- DJ techniques of liminality and the ritual process of the dance floor
- techno-primitivism and the sampling of the exotic 'Other'
- the influence of gospel music and the Baptist church on garage music
- psychedelic trance, ecology and millennialism
- psychoactive substance use and neural tuning.

Rave Culture and Religion will be essential reading for advanced students and academics in the fields of sociology, cultural studies and religious studies.

Graham St John is Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Centre for Critical and Cultural Studies at the University of Queensland, where he is working on a critical ethnography of the Australian techno-tribal movement, and researching new youth countercultures and unofficial strategies of reconciliation. He recently edited *FreeNRG: Notes from the Edge of the Dance Floor* (2001).

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Foreword

Never trust a writer to chronicle a movement.

Those of us filing early dispatches from the temporary autonomous zones later known as raves really thought we were just observing the scene – well, participating in the way that all journalists since Hunter S. Thompson have had to acknowledge their own presence at the fringe of the story, but not really engaging in the event as one of *them*, those kids who really think something is happening beyond a bunch of people dancing on drugs.

Right. *You* try going to a rave as a spectator and see what happens.

For me, it all began while I was researching a book on early cyberculture. Around 1990, the entirety of California's emerging digital society seemed to be summed up by a single image: the fractal. I'd see the paisley-like geometry on Grateful Dead tickets, in new reports out of UC Santa Cruz about systems theory, on the T-shirts of kids also wearing cryptic smiles, in books on chaos maths and on the computer screens of virtual-reality programmers at Sun. These depictions of non-linear math equations – equations that cycle almost infinitely rather than finding 'solutions' as we commonly think of them – embodied a new way of looking at the world.

As we were all to learn, the fractal is a self-similar universe. Zoom in on one level, and you find a shape strikingly similar but not exactly the same as one on a higher level, and so on. The fractal is a conceptual leap, inhabiting the space between formerly discrete dimensions. In the process, it allows us to measure the very rough surfaces of reality – rocks, forests, clouds and the weather – more accurately and satisfactorily than the idealistic but altogether limited linear approximations we'd been using since the ancient Greeks. The fractal heralded a new way of looking at the world – of experiencing it – and of understanding that every tiny detail reflected, in some small way, the entirety of the system.

That's why when an anonymous skate kid on the Lower Haight happened to hand me a tiny swatch of paper with a fractal stamped on one side, I was compelled to turn it over and try to decrypt the little map on the other. By about two the next morning, having found the mysterious location (apparently an abandoned warehouse in Oakland), I also discovered the true meaning of the fractal.

See, I was a writer – on assignment from New York, with a real advance. That gave me the perfect excuse to play the part of participant-observer. To stand on

the fringe, watch the crazy kids on E drinking their smart drinks, playing with brain machines and dancing under lasers to the 120 bpm bleep tracks. Cool. I'd happened upon an update of the Acid Test, an environment designed to induce altered states of consciousness.

I didn't take it so very seriously, though, until I began talking with the organizers. As the first journalist on this particular scene, I got the royal treatment. This was before the rave movement and most of the rest of America became a media circus. There were still a few pockets like this one, and grunge, that remained relatively undiscovered country. But, unlike grunge, the kids making raves in America wanted to be discovered. They believed that they had created a hybrid of countercultural agenda and mainstream hype. It was a delicate balance, but the main idea was to make love trendy.

And all you had to do to 'get it' was show up, maybe pop an E, and dance with the beautiful boys and girls. That's right – dance with everyone, not a partner. It wasn't about scoring; it was about group organism. Like a slam-dance or mosh pit, but without the slamming. Just the groove. And the smiles. If everything went right – and usually everything went right – there'd be a moment, or maybe even a whole hour – when it just clicked into place. All the individual dancers would experience themselves as this single, coordinated being. A creature with a thousand arms and eyes, making love with itself and reaching back as far as creation and forward to the very end of time. They became a living fractal, feeding back on itself – sometimes quite literally with video cameras, projectors and screens – right through to infinity. And, as Peter Pan, the first fairytale raver, told us, 'beyond'.

Evolution was no longer competition, it was a team sport. Fuelled by music, chemicals, motion and, most of all, empathy. We were navigating a course through hyperspace to the attractor at the end of history.

Did I say 'we'? Of course I mean 'they'. For I was determined to remain on the fringe. One foot in, so I'd know what I was writing about, but one foot out, so I'd maintain my journalistic integrity. Or so I thought.

For what was I really hanging on to by keeping one foot off the dance floor at all times? Perspective? What did that matter when the view from inside the fractal is no less objective? All perspectives are arbitrary. Besides, how could I write about what this thing called 'rave' really looks like if I didn't know how the group sees itself? After all, that's the whole point of this exercise, right? To create group consciousness and group perspective?

No, I wasn't maintaining journalistic integrity at all, I told myself. I was just afraid. Of what? The intimacy. Losing myself to the sea of, well, love. Breaking the boundaries that helped me maintain the illusion that I am me, Douglas, the separate person from you. From them.

So, as I'm sure you've guessed by now, I went in. Well, why the fuck not? It was contagious, alive, welcoming and so very *very* seductive. It was a lust that I felt, plain and simple. Not for a sexual union, but to merge with this creature and all its many component people.

They got me. Or should I say *it* got me. And then I was it.

And I dutifully wrote my books about what I found out: there's a bunch of people dancing to a new kind of music, but it isn't just dancing because what they've discovered is that they've learned how to make God. Add a few bracketing devices so it doesn't look like I necessarily believe they can do what they think they're doing, and call it a day.

There was no way for me to emerge from the experience of rave, however, without becoming both its chronicler and its propagandist. This is your brain on journalism; this is your brain after being dipped into the rave phenomenon. My work of that period is probably more valuable as an example of what people wrote like when they were experiencing the rave reality than what may have actually happened. Or what it was really about. After I was done with my 'non-fiction' book about this culture, I wrote a fictitious novel that was entirely more accurate.

That's why this volume strikes me as so important. The contributors to this book have taken the time and exercised the discipline necessary to put rave in its proper historical and social context as a religious movement. I may have some problems with the word religion, because it sounds so organized and institutional, while rave has always been such a spontaneous and emergent phenomenon. But there are certainly some formulas involved in making a rave happen, and a pretty common set of reactions to the experience.

If it really is a religion, then I suppose rave is over in some respects. For once it can be catalogued and comprehended is it still a spiritual experience capable of breaking the boundaries between self and everything else? Perhaps not.

But beware. You don't have to be on E, or even in a club, to be infected by the very viral thought structures and emotional responses generated by a rave gathering. After all, a rave doesn't happen in space, but in time – stretching well into the past and into the future. We knew back then that we were speaking to others through our movements. Maybe those others were you.

Indeed, the raves on pages ahead of you are still occurring, and no matter how removed you think you might be from their effects, the logic of the fractal may just come to include you, too.

Douglas Rushkoff
New York, March 2003

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Introduction

Graham St John

Dance parties have transmuted the role that organised religion once had to lift us onto the sacramental and supramental plane.

(Ray Castle, in ENRG 2001: 169)

From African priests to Korean shamans, there was and still is the belief that dance and music can open communication with intangible powers and produce tangible benefits for the communities involved: self-knowledge; fuller understanding of the natural world; good health; and a sense of belonging to a supportive group in an often dark and hostile but ultimately understandable universe.

(Apollo 2001: issue 34)

David danced and sang before God and we're just bringing it back with a funkier beat.¹

On the other side of nihilism new formations are emerging, this time exploiting the faultlines in the cultural landscape by slipping through the gaps. Ecstatic dance offers one such line of flight. Dance culture exploits the power of music to build a future on the desolate terrain of the present.

(Hemment 1996: 26)

In early December 2002, several thousand psychedelic trance enthusiasts journeyed to Lindhurst in the South Australian outback where, in the calm of a weeklong sonic onslaught, they witnessed a total solar eclipse. With precedents like the Solipse festivals in Hungary and Zambia, Outback Eclipse attracted young electronic dance music habitués from dozens of nations. Contemporary global events like Solipse, Portugal's Boom, Japan's Solstice23 and Australia's Exodus Cybertribal Festival draw inspiration from epic beach parties at the former Portuguese colony of Goa (India) and Moontribe's Full Moon gatherings in the Mojave Desert near Los Angeles. While diverse themselves, these events represent a mere snapshot of the moving panorama of that which came to be known as *rave*.² from the celebration of celestial events at remote locations to electro-salvation at metropolitan massives; from temporary Arcadias flourishing in converted warehouses, to transformational rituals like those facilitated by

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Philadelphia's Gaian Mind, to the brand-name liminality of super-clubs like London's Ministry of Sound; from huge corporate-sponsored extravaganzas like Tribal Gathering (where tens of thousands may congregate), to 'megatribal' gatherings like Earthdream, a 'technomadic' carnival held annually in Central Australia and destined to culminate on 21 December 2012 in accordance with the Mayan Sacred Calendar; from the gospel-inspired exhilaration of house and garage, to the Afrofuturism of jungle and Detroit techno, to techno-pagan doofs held in outdoor locations featuring ceremonial art installations and revived 'ancestral rituals'; from Earthdance, a Free Tibet movement fundraiser transpiring in over 100 cities in 70 countries simultaneously with a synchronized global cybercast, to Christian ecumenical raves like Sheffield's notorious 'Rave Mass' or Matthew Fox's Techno Cosmic Mass in California.³ Electronic dance music culture is a truly heterogeneous global phenomenon, motivating new spiritualities and indicating the persistence of religiosity amongst contemporary youth.

Despite its hybridization throughout the 1990s, the dance party rave – involving masses of young people dancing all night to a syncopated electronic rhythm mixed by DJs – maintains rapturous popularity in the West, developing diasporic tendrils from Ibiza to London, West Coast USA to Goa, India, Japan to South Africa, Brazil to Australia, and tourist enclaves from Thailand to Madagascar. Commonly accorded effects ranging from personal 'healing' or replenishment to transformations on social, cultural or political scales, rave – from clubland to outdoor doof, to technomadic festival – is a hyper-crucible of contemporary youth spirituality. Thus the question motivating this volume: what exactly is the role of the technocultural rave in the spiritual life of contemporary youth?

Emerging in London in 1988, and subsequently exported around the world, rave has proliferated and mutated alongside associated music and body technologies. Its primary theatre of action was and remains the dance floor, a kinaesthetic maelstrom inflected by diverse sonic currents and technological developments influencing that which has been generically dubbed 'house', 'electronica' and 'techno'. Throughout the 1990s rave grew prevalent in the experience of urban youth as vast numbers attached primary significance to raving. With the combined stimulus of electronic musics, psychotropic lighting, chemical alterants and all-night dancing, young novices and experienced habitués transcended the mundane in converted warehouses, wilderness areas, beaches, deserts and streets. Decked out in esoteric accessories, ultra violet (UV)-reactive clothing, personalized icons and an array of assimilated 'religious' glossolalia, their ecstatic experiences moved multitudes to draw on a plenitude of traditional interpretative religious frameworks – Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, pagan, Australian Aboriginal, mystical, etc. – often refracted through lenses taken up by generational forebears themselves heir to frameworks inadequate for communicating their own revelations.

Such communications are fraught with the dilemmas not unfamiliar to earlier generations of youth, for there exists a curious tension between contraries within the culture of rave. The desire to disseminate event-derived revelations, to mount the 'rave-o-lution', competes with a desire to remain hidden, covert, cultic

even. For many, the orthodox rave is, and should remain, underground, with the location of parties communicated by word of mouth and on subtle flyers distributed through local channels. Efforts to maintain a 'tribal' identity, an 'underground sociality' (Maffesoli 1996), through commitment to genre (e.g. jungle, psytrance, gabba, garage, ragga, two step, etc.) and to the almost universal envelope-pushing esoterica. Simon Reynolds (1998: xvii) identifies as *hardcore*, evidence a refusal, an aloofness, an invisibility thought to hold back the long entwined arms of state administrations and corporate entertainment industries – which have made significant advances in regulating and assimilating this culture. Yet, while with acid house 'a whole subculture attempts to vanish' (Melechi 1993: 38), others rupture this logic of disappearance, desiring to inject the 'meme' into the parent culture, to share the conspiracy, converting, through various channels, the 'hundredth monkey'. While tacticians of dance undertake to transform values without seeking to attract attention to themselves, for cultural luminaries disappearance and secrecy cultivate paranoia and panic, thwarting the critical mass pursued.

Rave enjoys a direct inheritance from disco and house developments in the post-Stonewall gay communities of New York City (NYC) and Chicago in the 1970s and 1980s. As Apollo (Henry Kielarowski) postulates in his intimate history of house, *House Music 101*, it was in this period in NYC that an oppressed subculture consisting of a fair proportion of African-Americans and Latinos gave birth to house music and modern electronic dance culture. Deriving from gospel, soul and funk, as well as Latino salsa, house is said to be the music 'of both sin and salvation', an attempt to 'reconcile body and soul' which, in its current manifestations, retains 'that yearning we all have to celebrate the spirit through the body' (Apollo 2001: issue 3). Significantly, house evolved at a time when it was widely anticipated by its adherents that it would abolish all 'the soul sickness of the world – racism, bigotry, poverty, Puritanism, war – and establish a new order based on peace and love' (*ibid.*). The anthem was sampled and remixed in time for the much-mythologized 'second summer of love' (late 1980s), and at the beginning of the 21st century post-rave maintains a millennialist charge.

Members of the rave milieu hold shares in ecstatic 'communities of feeling', both clandestine and over the counter. A popular vehicle of hope, compassion and expectancy – surely amplified at a time when a millennium closes and another begins – rave holds a conspiratorial optimism perhaps best characterized by zippie Fraser Clark's widely promoted 'pronoia', a term coined by Electronic Frontier Foundation co-founder and Grateful Dead lyricist John Perry Barlow as 'the suspicion the Universe is conspiring on your behalf'.⁴ Assembled from cyber, digital and chemical technologies, rave is believed to be the foundation for a culture democratic, empathogenic, cyborgian and sublime – its culture a determined flight, with varying degrees of success, from pop, rock and club realms where the dancing body is an object of media, state (and male) surveillance. While indebted to the 1960s, which saw the mass production and distribution of new technologies of transformation (especially LSD) and multimedia excursions like Kesey's Trips Festival (San Francisco, January 1966), the empathetic character

4 Introduction

distinctive to rave has been largely activated by the ‘love drug’ MDMA, or ‘ecstasy’ – an entheogenic ‘body technology’ regarded as something of a ‘utopiate’ infiltrating house club culture through 1970s and 1980s gay and mixed club scenes, psycho-therapeutic circles and new spiritual formations in the US (Eisner 1994; Beck and Rosenbaum 1994). In his comprehensive treatment of dance culture, *Energy Flash*,⁵ Reynolds suggests that ‘E’ was early exalted as ‘the remedy for alienation caused by an atomised society’, with rave evolving ‘into a self-conscious science of intensifying MDMA’s sensations’ (1998: xxii, xxvi).

Despite commercial encroachment and state regulatory controls, through Chicago house and with the advent of acid house (in the late 1980s, UK) a utopic strain has nourished the hybrid rave experience and remains at the centre of its self-promotion – a utopianism expressed in the pop-mantra PLUR (peace, love, unity, respect), the ‘Four Pillars of House Community’ adapted from comments attributed to DJ Frankie Bones at a Brooklyn Storm Rave in 1992 (Fritz 1999: 203–4). Post-rave promoters have successfully endorsed raving as a possibility engine for the self; a nocturnal utopia upon which rave-tourists disembark from their everyday lives; an antinomian otherworld within which event-inhabitants are licensed to perform their other selves; a sacred topos where dance-initiates and habitués (re)connect with co-liminars, nature and the cosmos. Many commentators celebrate the non-Christian religiosity of dance ‘ritual’, dubbing it, as does chaos art designer Gregory Sams (1997), the ‘new church’. Optimistic or nostalgic, embracing pre- or post-Christian communions, post-rave pundits champion the ‘shamanic’ states of consciousness engendered or ‘trance’ states triggered by the new ritual.

The rhythmic soundscapes of electronic dance music genres are thought to inherit the sensuous ritualism, percussive techniques and chanting employed by non-Western cultures and throughout history for spiritual advancement. As house is compared favourably with the Cult of Oro in pre-Christian Polynesia, the Hopi Indian Snake Dance and Yoruba trance (Apollo 2001: issue 33), and raving with Sufi dancing or the Kirtan dancing of Hare Krishnas (Fritz 1999), the new church is, as Jimi Fritz claims in his *Rave Culture: An Insider’s Overview*, ‘non-denominational’ – with the ‘trance states’ serving ‘a more personal journey through the dancer’s own psyche that can ultimately prove to be...rewarding for spiritual or psychological growth’ (Fritz 1999: 79). While rave’s trance dance is rarely culturally encoded and incorporated into everyday life in a fashion that may characterize the experience of the Yoruba, having caught the eye of ‘post-modern theologians’, the new ‘mass’ has been embraced for ecumenical purposes, a circumstance exemplified by the monthly Techno Cosmic Mass in Oakland, California, where the Episcopal priest and director of the University of Creation Spirituality, Matthew Fox, adopts electronic music, multimedia, trance dancing and rap to revitalize the Judeo-Christian Mass, to reawaken ‘a sense of the sacred’.⁶

Extolled as a source of growth, union, salvation or the sacred, raving is thus exalted as a site of becoming. Driven by post-1960s millenarianism, many have laboured to disclose a ‘revolutionary’ culture holding the potential ‘to ultimately

change the course of human consciousness' (Fritz 1999: 38). With rave, class, ethnicity, gender and other social distinctions were imagined to dissipate. Thus, according to one baton-wielding commentator: 'We are the visionaries, and it is our job to slowly change society. There was a women's movement, a sexual revolution, and many other giant steps taken by previous generations. It is now time for the next revolution' (Pete, in Saunders *et al.* 2000: 175). In the euphoric headrush of post-apartheid South Africa, David Dei and Jesse Stagg (n.d.) wrote that 'fascism dissolves before the resistance of the rave generation' and the 'love virus' said to be infecting South African youth in the early 1990s. Offering a blueprint for social change, trailblazing a path to the promised land, the 'Mass', 'movement' or 'rave nation' elicited by these authors, practitioners and spokespeople is even thought to seed 'a new form of liberation theology' (Hill 1999: 97). Sampling 'brotherhood' and 'heart chakras', rave evangelists communicate their conversion experiences. Amidst a rich vein of reports, Fritz communicates his first rave (at the age of 40):

I had walked into a different world...without judgement or fear...I was in a sea of six hundred radiant souls putting into practice five thousand years of religious and philosophical hypothesis. Beyond the conceptual world of ideas and dogma this was a direct experience of tribal spirituality practiced by our ancestors...my experience that night changed my life for the better.

(Fritz 1999: 5–6)

Subsequent to his revelation, Fritz went forth to deliver the word.

Other commentary, including that rising to the surface of the global mediascape and evident in the serial moralizing of Christian teen fiction (cf. LaHaye and DeMoss 2001), questions the meaning and morals of rave/dance culture, challenging the quality of the 'communion', the purpose of the 'ritual' and the substance of this youth 'movement'. Gauging the range of responses to youth *ekstasis*, the collective expression amongst contemporary youth of that which for Reynolds smells like 'Dionysian spirit', is a curious project. For establishment reaction, evident for example in the notorious RAVE (or Reducing Americans' Vulnerability to Ecstasy) Bill in the United States,⁷ reveals a trenchant fear of youth transcendence – as authorities, suspicious of bodily pleasure, conflate dance with moral corruption. Yet the prospect is also received with discomfort and even treated with contempt by an academic tradition inheriting the scepticism of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary and Cultural Studies, for whom neo-Marxist-oriented youth cultural 'resistance' was primary. By and large, youth cultural studies has unsatisfactorily addressed both dance – dismissed as a retreat from (masculine) resistance – and non-traditional youth religiosity. From the jazz, rock, purist perspective, dance maintains a 'seductive' force, thought to 'weaken critical faculties by encouraging us to respond to music in ways which involve neither contemplation nor respect' (Straw 2001: 159). Disciplinary paradigms populated by secular humanists too often balk at the prospect of young (especially white) people corporealizing utopian dreams,

entering alternate states of consciousness and communicating with the sacred (with or without the assistance of psychoactives). This is probably, in part, due to the way rational sociological models cannot possibly circumscribe that which Rudolf Otto named the '*mysterium tremendum*', the religious experience which he indicated 'may burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsions, or lead to the strongest excitements, to intoxicated frenzy, to transport, and to ecstasy' (1959: 27).

Furthermore, the significance of that which the anthropologist of cultural performance Victor Turner dubbed the realm of the 'subjunctive mood' – a world of 'wish, desire, possibility or hypothesis' (Turner 1982: 83) – has been routinely overlooked or misapprehended by practitioners of youth cultural studies. Ludic spaces are too often cast as 'frivolous' and 'inconsequential'. Although recent dance ethnographies conducted on clubbing (Malbon 1999; Pini 2001) provide exceptions, the highly valued, unpredictable and potentially transcendent alterities licensed are often dismissed as irrational and mere 'pretence' as emic *play* is consigned to the devalued territory of 'make-believe' or 'fantasy' (Handelman 1990: 70). While an apparent depthless 'hyperreality' transpires (see Redhead 1993), the 'fantasy of liberation' (Melechi 1993: 37) thought to characterize rave demonstrates continuity with the ineffectual 'rituals of resistance' thought to underline earlier youth 'subcultures'.

Questioning rave's millennialism, some commentators challenge the ostensible levelling of social relations of the liberatory rave (e.g. McRobbie 1994: 170; Thornton 1995; Saldanha 2002). Others, like Douglas Rushkoff (1999), have lamented the compromising of rave's 'Sabbath'-like holy day by corporate interests and politics. Others still, usually health researchers, have highlighted the risks to youth posed by ecstasy, often having neglected to report that much of what passes for 'ecstasy' is substituted (often cut with aspirin, caffeine, methamphetamine or other dangerous substances), with national prohibitionary classifications and the intransigent dismissal of harm-minimization strategies unnecessarily compromising public health and increasing risks for the uneducated. The title of one publication, *The Love Drug: Marching to the Beat of Ecstasy* (Cohen 1998), calls up an image of innocent youth seduced by an insipid robo-pharmacological pied piper. For Reynolds (1998), a dystopic comedown from chemical nirvana suggests that the living dream may have turned nightmare – with raving mutating from a 'paradise regained' to a 'psychic malaise'. With the excessive and routinized use of adulterated ecstasy (and increased polydrug abuse – e.g. mixing with 'crystal meth' and other 'obliviates') 'scenes lose their idyllic lustre and become a soul-destroying grind' (Reynolds 1998: xxxi; see also Push and Silcott 2000: ch. 13). And, together with genre fragmentation, the plunge into rave's dark side has precipitated a 'seeping away of meaning, the loss of a collective sense of going somewhere' (Reynolds 1997: 102).

What is the religious experience of rave? Is it confined to the appropriation of religious resources and iconography, such as the ironized Christian motifs of Drop Bass Network's 'Jesus Raves', held in Racine, Wisconsin in June 2002? Is rave just one more cultural sphere in tension with established practices and public policy

‘using religion’ to symbolize ‘ultimate meaning, infinite power, supreme indignation and sublime compassion’? (Beckford 1989: 172). Does spiritual rhetoric serve to establish subcultural capital within youth milieus? Or does rave contextualize phenomenal religious experiences? Does it conform to Bauman’s perceived devolution or ‘relocation’ of religious experience as ‘the product of a life devoted to the art of consumer self-indulgence’ (Bauman 1998: 70) or assist in delivering youth from a legion of maladies and stresses, offering meaning, purpose and hope to those whose playground may otherwise be confined to the parameters of Playstation II? A religious experience or a total leisure concept? Should we thus give credence to the experiences of its adherents as genuinely liberating or transcendent? Does rave assist in the provision of assurance in the face of pain, suffering and mortality, providing answers to life’s mysteries, or is this a contemporary realm for ‘psychedelic theophanies’ where, as Huston Smith (1976: 155) warned, one more readily finds an addiction to acquiring ‘the religious experience’ above commitment to ‘the religious life’?

Furthermore, what is rave’s ritual character? Is it a rite of passage – and, if so, what is its level and quality of efficacy? What is its telos? Is it a ritual of communion, a mass ‘return’ to a ‘womb’ which sees co-inhabitants secure in a nutrient-rich and numinous pre-separation stage, or an *anomic* post-partum ‘dead-zone’ catering for escapist desires and tragic careers in over-expenditure? An ‘oceanic experience’ (Malbon 1999) or a kind of prolonged youth suicide? Does post-rave more closely approximate a church, Disney World, or a ‘detention camp for youth’ (Reynolds 1998: 424)? Has the cyber-chemical-millennarianism which flourished under the roof of the original acid house been domesticated – the rapture contained and smothered in regulated and commodified leisure sites? Or has its technospiritual fervour been smuggled away into furtive temporary autonomous zones where it percolates still?

Perhaps the inquiry should be less about religion *per se* than spirituality. After all, as Heelas has stated, in the de-traditionalized present ‘people have what they *take* to be “spiritual” experiences without having to hold religious *beliefs*’ (1998: 5). The current volume holds that something substantial is at work in dance culture. Rave culture has certainly not been impervious to niche marketing, consumer pressure and brand loyalties, and it would not be inaccurate to articulate contemporary formations as part of the ‘meta-experiential goods and services’ industry run by today’s peak-experience providers (Bauman 1998). Yet, as a temporary respite from the cycle of living-through-buying at the heart of possessive materialism, as a community largely for and by youth, rave and its progeny are potent sites of *being together*. And this, together with an understanding of the commitments undertaken by young people to defend their community from those who would imperil or undermine it, should provide us with a subject worthy of our contemplation.

Book outline

The collection is divided into four parts. The first, 'Techno culture spirituality', deciphers trends within the fast developments and vast detritus of rave culture. In the road-mapping of a spiritual practice and the fashioning of a teleology, a purpose, a commitment, the dance millennium draws upon a vast repertoire of theistic and communitarian principles. In Chapter 1, 'The difference engine: liberation and the rave imaginary', the editor initiates a comprehensive investigation of rave's religiosity, exploring the vast psycho-cultural terrain of the rave imaginary. Attending to primary narratives (ascensionist and re-enchantment) and soteriological functions, I explore the liberatory configuration of rave, charting the gnostic and salvific themes implicit in its culture and illuminating contemporary youth participation in key developments (e.g. New Age and Neo-Pagan) of post-traditional religiosity. While dancescaping are often reported to be utopic experiences perhaps best translated – in the language of Victor Turner – as a techno-'communitas' (a theme cropping up regularly throughout the volume), they are complex utopic sites, often appearing rather heterotopic in character. Elective 'disappearance' into carnivalesque zones facilitating sustained experimentation with subjectivity and community enables the modification of self and society, but it does so in a hyper-liminal context.

As a techno-communion, dance culture constitutes an interfacing of technology and humans, a core theme taken up by Hillegonda C. Rietveld in Chapter 2, 'Ephemeral spirit: sacrificial cyborg and communal soul'. Undertaking an exploration of techno (trance) and house developments in the history of electronic music, Rietveld concludes that, as an 'interface spirituality', post-rave is the 'spiritual rite of the post-industrial cyborg'. Both this and the previous chapter are partially informed by Erik Davis's *Technosis* (1998). While the former makes a not always clear division of the posthumanist (spirituality) from the revivalist (sacrality) trajectories of techno, Rietveld makes a corresponding distinction between a cyborgian techno spirit and a gospel-influenced (and thus embodied and ensouled) house community – an analysis informed by the sexual politics of electronic music: where males become more devoted to a machine aesthetic, females are engaged in the scene's human relational experience. Sacrifice is another key theme common to both opening chapters. While in the earlier contribution individual commitment to underground ('DIY') events forges community identification and may facilitate redemption, in the latter an adaptation of Georges Bataille's concept of sacrifice informs Rietveld's observation of the dancer losing self to the music, to the machine, thereby assisting transition to a cyborg-like subjectivity in a period of information-technology-induced identity crisis.

The theme of self-sacrifice assists our passage to Part II, 'Dance, rapture and communion', which investigates the primary activity of raving, dance. In Chapter 3, 'Rapturous ruptures: the "instituant" religious experience of rave', François Gauthier draws on seminal French theory to explicate how rave's primary activity constitutes a religious experience. As he explains, the strong and growing 'effe-

vescence of rave in contemporary youth culture', illustrates thriving religiosity in fragmented and non-institutional forms. In conjunction with an application of French anthropologist and theorist of contemporary religion Roger Bastide, which assists in the transcription of raving as 'savage trance' in a period where 'truth and meaning must come from and be judged on the scale of *experience*', Gauthier draws upon a depth reading of Bataille to regard rave as an exemplary manifestation of the 'damned', 'blasted' or 'accursed share' of contemporary humanity. Focusing on its tendency towards excess and communion, rave is perceived as a cultural resurgence of the festive, an eternal present 'brewing up mythologies of an elsewhere' which provides 'new avenues for experiences of the sacred in an atomized society'. Committed to a 'logic of sacrificial consumption', rupturing the profane, becoming 'other' or 'feral' to rock spectacles and 'domesticated' leisure practices and facilitating a transgression most readily observable in the abandon of *dance* or 'trance', rave hastens that which Bastide calls an 'instituant' religious experience.

Curiously, the savage religion of the 'instituant' experience parallels performance ethnographer Victor Turner's concept of 'spontaneous communitas', itself indexing a primary moment, an apocalypse of subjectivity. Like the instituant, communitas often catalyses normative social configurations, which themselves stimulate unstructured, or 'anti-structural' paroxysms. Indeed, Turner's work has become seminal to rave culture studies. Such is demonstrated in Chapter 4, '“Connectedness” and the rave experience: rave as new religious movement?' Drawing upon an ethnographic study of the central Canadian rave scene, Tim Olaveson pays tribute to the utility of Turner and Émile Durkheim, whose equivalent approaches to public paroxysms – as 'communitas' and 'effervescence' – offer conceptual value in the systematic exploration of a core attribute of raving – 'connectedness'. Olaveson proposes that rave's techniques and practices of connectedness demonstrate instances of 'syncretic ritualizing' (Grimes) which, in their creative spontaneity, their 'vibe' (a theme arising elsewhere in the volume – Chapter 7–10), constitute a likely source of contemporary cultural revitalization. Thus, his discussion also raises the possibility of understanding rave as a new religious movement, adaptive to the apparent meaninglessness of consumer culture – a prospect tentatively embraced since global rave is hardly a 'movement' or 'cult' with a central body of teachings or a single charismatic leader. While Olaveson holds 'connectedness' to be a phenomenological experience involving an embodied condition, it is James Landau who attends to the corporeal experience of raving, in Chapter 5. With the assistance of traditional philosophies of depth, in 'The flesh of raving: Merleau-Ponty and the “experience” of ecstasy' Landau describes the lived, bodily experience of ravers' self/other boundary dissolution. Deleuze and Guattari's Body-without-Organs (BwO) and the Lacanian Real are found wanting. But, with its emphasis on reversibility, ambiguity and interconnectedness, with its non-dualistic 'ontology of the flesh', Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is cast as a useful model for understanding the apparent contradiction in the ecstatic rave experience: the claim that participants feel simultaneously 'dissolved within *and* separate from the universe'. Such is possible

since the body possesses ‘innate knowledge’ of its simultaneous unity with the world and its alterity from it – its ‘difference-within-identity’.

Any study of electronic music culture, especially with relation to the sense of community, abandonment and transcendence occasioned on the dance floor, would be incomplete without attention to the significance of psychoactive substances or ‘entheogens’ – a non-pejorative non-ethnocentric term recommended by Ott (1993) to indicate shamanistic substances. While Landau laudably avoids a ‘neurodeterministic reduction of ecstasy to MDMA’, we cannot ignore the role of substances like MDMA, LSD or other entheogens in dance. In ‘Entheogenic dance ecstasis: cross-cultural contexts’ (Chapter 6), Des Tramacchi explores the broad parallels existing between non-Western community-oriented entheogenic rituals and psychedelic dance parties. Drawing on ethnographic descriptions of peyote use among the Mexican Huichol, *yajé* (*ayahuasca*) sessions among the Barasana of Colombia and *eboka* by Bwiti cult members among the Fang and Metsogo of Gabon, Tramacchi discerns that their common structural elements are also prominent features of ‘bush parties’, or ‘doofs’, found flourishing in northern New South Wales and southeast Queensland, Australia. Though LSD may be the most common psychoactive at doofs, MDMA or ‘E’ is clearly the most prevalent dance drug. Yet, while this may be the case, in Chapter 7, ‘The “natural high”: altered states, flashbacks and neural tuning at raves’, Melanie Takahashi indicates that most participants in her central Canadian research emphasized that, contrary to much of the literature, substance use is not as central to their experience. While the limitation or discontinuance of psychoactive consumption is reported among ‘a growing category of rave participants’, psychoactives remain significant since, as Takahashi observes, initial exposure to MDMA in particular can stimulate permanent changes in the central nervous system (‘neural tuning’), enabling the ‘natural’ approximation of alternative states of consciousness at subsequent raves given the presence of specific triggering devices within the dance environment.

The discussion of neural tuning propels us toward the role of music in dance cultures and its purported transformative function, and thus towards Part III, ‘Music: the techniques of sound and ecstasy’. While practitioners and scholars of dance culture wax lyrical about the ‘ritual’ or ‘shamanic’ character of rave, as Morgan Gerard points out there has generally been a dearth of analysis explaining such ritual. Drawing on his ethnography of Toronto’s Turbo Niteclub, in Chapter 8, ‘Selecting ritual: DJs, dancers and liminality in underground dance music’, Gerard offers a meta-processual interpretation of the rave/club experience, which in the totality of the electronic music performance, dancing participants and their ongoing interaction is a complex liminal environment. Heavily indebted to Victor Turner, Gerard thus understands the complicated interactive performance context of the underground rave/club as something of a unique ‘ritual process’. Departing from the lack of interest in the music and dance of youth ritual displayed by earlier theorists of youth culture, the rave/club is described as an arena of youth transformation made possible by the spatialization and performance of music, and thought dependent upon the

way participants ‘negotiate liminality’ throughout the course of events. Depending on their ‘ritual knowledge’, for dancers each DJ mix may replay, and eventually accelerate, the phases of van Gennep’s rites of passage, effecting belonging in a dance-floor community.

From Canadian tech-house and techno to UK garage. In Chapter 9, ‘Sounds of the London Underground: gospel music and Baptist worship in the UK garage scene’, Ciaran O’Hagan traces the way African-American patterns of worship have influenced developments within UK garage. In a discussion of repressive legislation, south London’s Sunday scene and pirate radio, O’Hagan indicates how gospel-inspired house music in the United States and procedures within the Baptist church have informed the musical structure and style of delivery particular to this scene. Indeed, the tactics and role of the UK garage MC possess an apparent equivalence to that of the Baptist preacher – employing call-response techniques and fostering belonging and communion.

If, as Gerard suspects (echoing Turner), ‘retribalisation is well underway’, it has been arguably most visible in San Francisco. Through discussion of the performances of a Santa Cruz-based Balinese *gamelan* group (Gamelan Anak Swarasanti) at raves within the Bay Area, in Chapter 10, ‘*Gamelan*, techno-primitivism and the San Francisco rave scene’, Gina Andrea Fatone indicates two significant features of this development: first, that it highlights parallels in the trance-inducing structure of techno and traditional *gamelan* music – though, as Fatone infers, research on the character of altered states of consciousness in electronic music culture requires further exploration; and, second, in furtherance to a discussion initiated in this volume by St John (on re-enchantment, Chapter 1) and Gerard (the perceived ‘primitive numinosity’ of dance), the appropriation of *gamelan* evidences rave’s nostalgia for the ‘primitive’ and reverence for hi-technology, a juxtaposition revealing a ‘techno-primitivism’ whereby the *gamelan* ensemble, not unlike the didjeridu and other homogenized ‘ethnic’ and exotic instruments, becomes ‘a tool of authentication’ for youth facing ‘the threat of ever increasing mechanization’.

The subsumption of the ‘primitive’ in events transpiring in the ‘technocultural present’ enables our negotiation to the final part, ‘Global tribes: the technomadic counterculture’, which covers the countercultural proclivities of a globalized psychedelic trance culture: its neotribalism, ecologism, revivalism, principle sites of pilgrimage, and its role in the formation of a digital art religion in possession of an idealistic, utopic and ‘resistant’ character open to challenge. In Chapter 11, ‘Techno millennium: dance, ecology and future primitives’, the editor documents the significance of ecologism for an emergent dance movement. The chapter documents the patterns by which awareness of an accelerating environmental crisis has shaped neo-tribes and new rituals forming in global centres. It documents how, throughout the 1990s, a creative synthesis of new technologies and reconstructed pre-industrial religiosity characterized the interventions of several thinkers, artists and spokesmen whose millenarian ideas circulate within trance culture. From London to San Francisco, a ‘cyber-tribal’ youth network – whose events are often claimed to occasion an ethical relationship, or reconciliation, with

the Earth – emerged within a period of optimism and revitalization fed by cyber and digital developments. The Mediterranean island of Ibiza (Spain) and the former Portuguese colony of Goa (India) are principal exotic locations in the evolution of this global counterculture. Based on ethnography undertaken at these sites, in Chapter 12, ‘Global nomads: techno and New Age as transnational countercultures in Ibiza and Goa’, Anthony D’Andrea explores the convergence of techno-culture and self-expressive (New Age) spirituality in the formation of ‘nomadic subjects’ whose technological adaptation, transpersonal rituals, ‘erotico-aesthetics’ and transgressions, whose ‘limit experiences’ (Foucault), are said to be composed within a ‘globalizing digital art-religion’. Investigating an emergent ‘techno’ movement possessing strong New Age influences, D’Andrea maps the new nomadic sites of self- and community experimentation – a global ‘utopian underground’ exiting the nation-state, transgressing major moralities and challenging the dominant institutions constitutive of the modern subject.

As D’Andrea conveys, nomads with post-national identities gravitated to Goa – which became the exotic beachhead of trance-dance and digital-tribalism. Something of the ‘post-sexual’ lifestyle of D’Andrea’s global freak is sighted in Chapter 13 by Erik Davis, whose ‘Hedonic tantra: golden Goa’s trance transmission’ circumscribes the significance of trance, an intrinsic component of the non-genital pleasures of ‘spiritual hedonism’. In a first-person journey into the psychedelic heart of Goan trance (based on a report from his visit there in 1993), Davis draws a parallel between Deleuze and Guattari’s BwO and Hindu tantric procedure, implying the continuity of psychedelic trance dance with the latter. Effecting a transmutation of cosmic energy, or *shakti*, of sexual energy into ‘rarer and more potent elixirs’, trance harbours an ‘alchemical dynamic’ for the bohemian and psychedelic subcultures of rave. This at least approximates the received wisdom of those whose anti-authoritarian practices and techniques – mystical, provisional, cobbled together, ambivalent and often incoherent – have formed, in the ‘freak colony’ of Goa, something of an ‘anti-traditional tradition’ transmitted to current and future generations of post-Goa spiritualists. Nevertheless, Davis became alarmed about the ‘superficiality’ of the Goan scene’s relationship with India, with the egotism of DJs and the presence of those bearing a resemblance to a ‘gnostic elite’. Such themes are taken up by Arun Saldanha, who argues in Chapter 14, ‘Goa trance and trance in Goa: smooth striations’, that mystical experiences and exclusionary politics are interdependent. Drawing on ethnography conducted on the practices of trance travellers in Anjuna, Goa, Saldanha illustrates the fiction of PLUR and challenges rave’s status as a site of resistance, thus renovating the poststructuralism of Deleuze and Guattari. Through a popular Deleuzo–Guattarian lens, the dance floor and its associated trance state are – by contrast to the ‘striated’, quantified and segregated spaces of capitalism, colonialism and the state – regarded as a ‘smooth space’ of non-subjectivity, of non-‘faciality’, a BwO. With the ethnographic revelation that ‘power and desire, domination and resistance, regulation and freedom, discipline and trance, habit and transcendence’ are not disentangled in the culture of rave, Saldanha concludes that raves do indeed reproduce

the ‘striations’ of capitalism, state regulation, patriarchy, heterosexism, classism, nationalism and racism. Thus, while not seeking to empty rave of its spiritual dimensions, he takes issue with the perception that raves are exclusively ‘smooth’ and opposed to ‘striation’. In isolating these shortcomings in the BwO, Saldanha effectively deals with the social consequences of the limitations in the BwO earlier noted by Landau – that its ‘smoothness’ does not account for the persistence of individual identity and distinctions.

Of all the emergent sites for the global freak, Nevada’s annual Burning Man Festival – which, not unlike developments described in previous chapters (10 and 11), evolved from the countercultural hub of San Francisco – remains a most unique venue for the expression of New Age/techno religiosity. In Chapter 15, ‘Dancing on common ground: exploring the sacred at Burning Man’, Robert V. Kozinets and John F. Sherry, Jr, draw on their ethnography to discuss how Burning Man shares commonalities with rave and a range of other contemporary alternative cultural and new spiritual events invoking primitivist symbolism in the manifestation of techno-pagan ritual. Echoing other techno trance events delineated in previous chapters and embodying the enchantment-retrieving character of the rave imaginary outlined in Chapter 1, Kozinets and Sherry’s ethnography of ‘the burn’ provides commentary on the conjoining of audio/cyber technologies and Neo-Pagan beliefs and sensibilities in the fashioning of postmodern ritual – therapeutic, ‘tribal’, transformative. The authors argue that the self-transformative capacity of such events is dependent upon the successful creation of sacred space, and the latter is achieved through temporary festive inversions manifesting in the *in situ* rules of no spectators, no authorities and no market.

The theme of dancing up the sacred in the contemporary period arises throughout this collection and goes to the heart of the rave phenomenon. Whether conceived as primal, futurist, tribal, global or some combination thereof, whether market-driven *communitas* or countercultural in orientation, new dance cultures are an important feature in the lives of contemporary youth. As the contributors to this collection demonstrate, electronic dance music culture contextualizes and fuels identity formation, inter-cultural understanding, resistance and belonging, despite evidence to the contrary. In a period of mass uncertainty and mounting crises, we cannot afford to underestimate the significance of this amorphous youth cultural presence.

Notes

- 1 <http://www.thepipeline.org/clubworship/whatisw.htm>.
- 2 ‘Rave’ is often used within this volume to denote a youth cultural sensibility that encompasses *both* the primary moment of rave (in the late 1980s, early 1990s) and its multifarious progeny. ‘Post-rave’ is sometimes used to designate a welter of cultural experiences and music events downstream from the moment of rave. Thus, far from denoting ‘non-rave’, ‘post-rave’ designates a quality of youth cultural experience that is firmly rooted in and indebted to rave.
- 3 From the late 1980s Sheffield’s Anglican Nine O’clock Service constituted ‘radical Christian discipleship’ in a multimedia environment, later producing the ‘theologically

- experimental' and influential 'Planetary Mass' (Roberts 1999: 11; also see Howard 1996). For the Techno Cosmic Mass, see: <http://www.technocosmicmass.org>.
 4 www.pronioa.net/def.html (accessed 16 October 2002).
 5 Reynold's *Energy Flash: A Journey Through Rave Music and Dance Culture* (1998) was also published in the US as *Generation Ecstasy: Into the World of Techno and Rave Culture*.
 6 <http://www.technocosmicmass.org> (accessed 16 November 2002).
 7 This repressive Bill, though defeated in 2002, was successfully legislated in April 2003 when it re-emerged as the Illicit Drug Anti-Proliferation Act sponsored by Senator Biden, a component of 'Crack House' amendments attached to Senator Daschle's Justice Enhancement and Domestic Security Act of 2003. For more information, see <http://epistolary.org/713.html> (accessed 6 May 2003).

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Part I

**Techno culture
spirituality**

