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Gender and Sexuality in Popular Music

**Transcending Identities in underground rave scenes - A case study of
Karacus Maracus 2021**

ABSTRACT

With the expansion of musicology in relation to gender studies and the increased emphasis on the importance of musical subcultures, the underground rave scene has risen into prominence as a safe exploratory space, where identities, individual or otherwise, are experimented with, transformed and merged. Music, Technology and improvised choreographies of dance come together to create atmospheres of self-exploration and trance. Focusing on various aspects of this identity play in the background and expanding upon “Cyborgs, Nomads and The Raving Feminine” by Maria Pini, this paper attempts to examine gender performances in electronic music scenes, specifically male gender performances, to better understand the connections between the different elements of music and technology, and the constructions, interactions and performances of actively changing gender identities on the dance floor.

It also takes inspiration from the theoretical frameworks presented by Maria Pini in her study of the underground rave scenes of London. To understand this process on a singular level, the case study of Karacus Maracus 2021 is chosen, an annual psychedelic trance music festival taking place on the beaches of Goa, India, with thousands in

attendance. In this research, the ethnographic process is applied, in which we take a glance at a personal evolution of gender identity through these spaces comparing it to another individual's experiences via an interview to explore and examine the transitions in gender identities in relation to their experiences at this festival.

Intro to Psychedelic Trance

The origins of this music lie in the hippie movement of the 1960s and 70s around the world. Consisting of fast beat-driven melodies, and sounds with largely electronic influence, psytrance presents itself as the face of the post-structural neo-psychedelic counter-culture movement. The music breaks down the traditional rhythm and melody structures and creates an atmosphere of unpredictability for the listeners in the experience. Creating spaces of mediation and self-exploration, psychedelic trance music lives up to its name. From a postmodern perspective, the hedonistic and spiritual celebrations of self-indulgence through these modes portray a subversion of traditional music spaces. (Saldanha, 2010; St. John, 2010) These unique processes combined in this environment with psychedelic substances result in *gnostic* or higher experiences (or higher consciousness, as some would prefer) and create an improvised choreography of signs and movements. Understanding the larger impact of these improvised choreographies specifically, and of the rave environment in general, on the gender identities and performances of the male participants is the main aim of this research paper.

In March 2022, I had the opportunity to attend Karacus Maracus VII, the seventh edition of an annual psychedelic festival happening on the beaches of Goa. Organised by Pralayah Records, a record label from Mumbai, India, the festival had its biggest version yet, with over 6000 people in attendance from all over the world. It was 5 days of continuous, loud music from over 50 international artists on Dream Beach, a private event venue in Vagator, Goa. As one of the most elusive events in the global psychedelic music scene, Karacus Maracus was an escape from the hustle and bustle of the regional Indian life to an alien world full of unknowns. The research would further elaborate on these personal experiences from the festival in contrast to other experiences of my peers, to gain a better understanding of the queer experience in these spaces. Goa is one of the more culturally diverse places in the country, attracting tourists from all over the world. This unique blend of cultures and counter-cultures has given rise to a space full of possibilities and open-minded interactions. Gender expression and similar forms of social communication are not generally a part of daily experiences for most individuals in other parts of the country, and their participation in these counter-cultural spaces presents them with that opportunity.

Theoretical explorations of Rave Spaces

The present state of research in musicology related to psychedelic trance music and related subcultures remains somewhat limited, much like the impact of this genre on the wider society, in the participatory aspect at least. Raves and other counter-culture efforts are dismissed in academic circles as failed attempts at sexual regression, and the impact of spaces of psychedelia on the individual's identity remains

an unresolved area of academic study. Musical subgenres are a fast-growing cultural phenomenon, and academic research hasn't kept up, mainly due to the illegality of many of these events and substances inducing an altered state of mind. Even then, the relevance of inquiry into the music of rave environments only grows further as these raves become a site of unique human experiences and performances. These experiences of the rave are not structured around 'traditional dualisms of mind/body, self/other, physicality/machine', says Pini in her text 'Cyborgs, Nomads and The Raving Feminine'. (Pini, 1997; Haraway, 1991) She expands on this by discussing the modern post-structural feminist perspectives and the new narratives that develop in relation to the 'mind, body, technology, physicality, the self and the other'. These topics have also been approached by theorists like Foucault in his text 'The Technologies of the Self' written in 1988 and Haraway through her text 'A Cyborg Manifesto' from 1991.

The theoretical understanding of rave as a 'lived, social practice' (Pini, 1997) was a critical shift away from understanding these events as structured around traditional dualisms in structuralism. The mind and body, self and other, nature and machine and other binaries restrict deeper understandings of the subject. The instinctual choreographies of signs improvised by ravers on the dance floor, according to Pini, are best understood as compared to the theoretical figurations of cyborgs and nomads. Pini makes this comparison because both terms, Cyborgs and Nomads represent a state of confusion between 'corporeal and fiction' and so do ravers, in many ways. (Pini, 1997:113) The rave has a layered significance produced by the embodied experience of the participants. Because of its apparent non-conformity to political movements of the left-wing, and claims of dissolution of social divisions by participants, the rave is often

dismissed as a retrogressive manifestation of sexual politics. The experiences of ravers, if properly explained and understood, introduce us to a new kind of politics concerned with the alternative experiences of the self through 'the mind-body-spirit-technology assemblage.'(Pini, 1997:118; McRobbie, 1994) The rave is able to radically reshape the individual's idea of self through this experience, moving away from the traditional dualities.

Here, a very interesting parallel could be established between the experiences on the dance floor of the rave and that of the club. The idea of dancing at the rave is almost a compulsion. Its unofficial and underground nature affects the facilities available as well. Usually, the spaces to sit, rest or observe others are limited. Also, in contrast to a traditional club environment, the space for men to observe women is not created in the rave. This male gaze becomes a defining characteristic of the club experience. The male-centric exploration and exhibition of sexual desires, the prime intent. Club music has evolved around the exhibition of sexuality in these experiences. Psychedelic trance music takes a different route. These defined territories for showcasing sexual desires are thoroughly absent in raves, which makes space for deeper alternate experiences for the self concerning the mind and the collective dancing body as a whole. With the sexual presentations of the individual, we find a destabilisation of sexual categories, similar to the concept introduced by Jacques Derrida in his interview titled 'Choreographies'. Elaborated upon by Maria Pini, he looked at dance spaces as disrupting the established social perceptions of said sexual categories, which in turn helped facilitate a move away from traditional dualities and linearity. In this mode, the mind and body are one, and the self is no longer understood from the Humanist perspective.

Individual Transformations - Case Study

“ Going into this experience, I already had a pre-conception of what the experience would bring, in terms of the audio experience, at least. The plan was made a year before, at the previous edition of the same festival when I was not yet fully immersed in the culture of psytrance. A year later though, it felt similar to going into the party atmosphere for the first time. The sub frequencies of the 10 feet tall speakers were reaching us hundreds of metres away, as we approached the venue, a private event space on a disconnected beach. All of my previous encounters with this music had intensified my expectations from the experience. The dancefloor resembled a jungle space. It was dark and disorienting but the synchronised animalistic movements of the crowd still echoed fluidity. Once in the middle of the space, my body could not help but move with the vibrations, and slowly but surely, my control over my train of thought slipped loose. At that moment, with the introduction, every new element in the chaotic sonic scenery was making my body move differently and shifting my thoughts in different directions. I had full control of myself, but felt a loss of self-restraint.”

(A. Gupta, November 3, 2022)

In a semi-structured interview with another participant (Anonymous, Personal Communication, November 5, 2022) of this event discussing the similarities or differences in our experiences, the first point brought up was regarding the delirium-inducing alien sounds and the impact of these sounds on the emotional state of the individual, and the preparation that usually precedes the whole affair. “The sounds in this music are placed to enhance the state of flow, and if someone’s popped”, referring to the consumption of acid, “they’re gonna have a good good time” they asserted, “The random sounds start to make sense when you let your mind experience the discomfort. Even if you’re not in an altered state of mind you’ll still be forced to move with the

vibrations. The main idea going into these experiences is to get lost in the sound and get a break from the constant struggles of college life, and the monotony that comes with it.”

In this example, the interactions of a cisgender heterosexual male with these spaces showcase the escapism that is possible through raves and psychedelia. The two of us agreed that discomfort is an incredible catalyst for personal growth if delivered through the correct mediums. While gender performance is not a prevailing issue in their day-to-day life, the freedom of movement and expression offered in these spaces, as well as the freedom to partake in open use of substances like marijuana or LSD, makes this raving space their preferred way of indulging in the pleasures of the self. “Literally everyone is on something”, again referring to the excessive consumption of substances in the festival, “if you wanna dance all night and not get tired, it’s the only way”. In this instance, through the sounds and the vibrations of the dance floor, it becomes incredibly easy to let go and jump inside your psyche, once under the influence of psychedelics. This point also solidified my understanding of raves as a space for a free collective experience of self.

The techno-primitivism in these spaces is a fascinating phenomenon. The animalistic movements in the raves are a product of the loud, disorienting music combined with the enhanced states of mind, and over time, the anti-static behaviour of the collective body appears to gain synchronicity in movements. Through these movements, new forms of self-expression arise, leading to the creation of new sexualities and new politics as discussed by Maria Pini. Her point remains that this animalistic performance of sexualities in raves is one unrelated to expressions of desire.

In this specific case study, a counter-argument is found. From a personal perspective, an increased need for a state of flow, something which was challenged again and again by the unpredictability of the music, presents itself. This 'anti-static' behaviour, characterized by the need for motion, flow and change is a form of desire in itself and is not restricted to the performances of any one gender or sexual orientation to the contrary, it is an expression of the desires of a collective dancing body. In this collective aspect, the competitive instincts of male sexuality are suppressed, making space for momentary manifestations of new sexualities through movement.

Conclusion

The underground rave provides a unique experience to its participants, detached from traditional normative experiences, as explained by Maria Pini in her text, 'Cyborgs, Nomads and the Raving Feminine'. The space is created with the main aim to subvert expectations and create atmospheres of unpredictability with sound which in turn, allows the individual to create new personal narratives through instantaneous choreographies. Specifically, in the case of the male participants, the raving space can free them from the traditionally competitive masculine experiences of the club giving them opportunities for creative expressions of the self. The raver is able to let go of their instinctual desires and the collective experience of the dance floor and synchronisation of dance movements leads to the creation of new forms of desires detached from the 'self'.

These interactions of a new form of 'self' allow us to have a glance at the possibilities of the future, both at an individual and a social level. With a new self comes new sexualities bringing along with it, new performances and expressions and new politics surrounding these interactions, all of which remain important for future inquiry into the subject.

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