

Just Happy Flesh?

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ABSTRACT

A review of McKenzie Wark's 2023 book, *Raving*.

McKenzie Wark tells us right away that she's going to take us raving (4) and she's no liar. Across six brisk yet lush chapters, she brings us along to raves in Brooklyn with stops in Berlin and Sydney. These are hot and fast portraits of the rave itself; light on, say, historical or ethnographic details regarding the origins, forms, and stakes of raves, ravers, and raving. The book is more rooted in Wark's experience of the parties and we get rich detail about her thoughts and feelings that surface before heading out for the night and during the rave: how one's body feels, awareness and critique of how other people are moving, the body's need for rest and water, the sheer heat of the raving body. We are privy to the swirls of her mind and body when she takes a break from the floor, and to the lasting impressions of the various physical, mental, and emotional comedowns that accumulate when she's left the party.

Raving is in many ways *not* a book about raving but of one's own anxious attachments to partying at a certain age, in a certain body, in a certain place, in a certain time-period, amongst certain people. The perspective that anxiety affords shapes and conditions the most conceptually interesting element of *Raving*: Wark's efforts to describe and theorize dissociation as the key method and perhaps idealized outcome of raving. In the book, dissociation comes in three forms: ravespace, where the body and mind are free from one another; enlustment, where the mind tunnels into the body; and xeno-euphoria, which is when, perhaps as a best-case scenario, "Time becomes stringently horizontal. Neither rising nor falling, just sideways swelling and slimming. The body slots in, to time, finding itself stranded through itself, through losing the form of its being in time. . . . for a few beats, or thousands, I'm not. Not here. Not anywhere. In the place where there's usually me, with all her anxieties and racing-racing thoughts and second-second guesses, there's just happy flesh, pumping and swaying, tethered only by gravity." (19)

Luckily, Wark does not stop at "just happy flesh." The rave is not a utopian site where the rules and regulations that come with inhabiting a body dissipate as the beat drones on. She usefully, if perhaps controversially, offers dissociation as a productive lens for understanding trans embodiment and experience. "Trans people are not the only ones who dissociate," Wark tells us early on, "but we tend to be good at it. We're a kind of people who need to not be in body or world. The body feels wrong. The world treats us as wrong." (8) Wark repositions dissociation not as a

pathologized medical debility but as a physical and aesthetic possibility conditioned by the rave—and, specifically, the nexus of music, dancing, and ketamine. She suggests that the modes of dissociation that ketamine facilitates at the rave actually “ressociates” ravers “on our own, but on our own together, trying to find the ways we can endure the end of this world.” (29) Raving is a practice that encourages a dissociation but it’s not ever or always antisocial or alienated. Wark ultimately works toward a definition and description of raving as a method of doing (trans) being and doing being-in-community.

I appreciate how the book demonstrates the solitude that comes with partying (you’re in your own head, you’re in your own body) while offering modes for narrating and theorizing when and how this solitude transforms into the communal. I was especially interested in Wark’s brief but sharp critique of academic romanticization of (queer) communism that, she argues, longs for a history that never existed and is thus unable to imagine or inhabit the present. (31) She routes the critique through the different experiences of consuming acid, which produces a solitary head trip, as opposed to the cozy togetherness spurred by ketamine. I unfortunately can’t quite tell you the ins and outs of her critique, however. Wark’s brevity is a challenge throughout *Raving*. The writing is often quite curt, perhaps meant to mimic the frenetic dashes of thinking, moving, and feeling at the rave. Sometimes this works, as in the chapter “Enlustment,” a perfectly calibrated narrative about partying with someone you have a crush on; a tight portrait of the optimism of possibility and wrestling with self-doubt. This writing style also works if it is meant to wrap the reader up in the feelings associated with the *worst* of the rave, when Wark and her readers are mired in anxious thoughts about how the body feels, who is around her and what they’re doing and thinking, the status of various romantic entanglements, the feeling and possibility of trans embodiments, and all of the other risks that come with entering into a deeply embodied consciousness.

Too often, though, Wark tries to transform self-portrait observation into general theorization, and this is when the writing moves into clunky territory. There are several regrettable sentences: the final lines in “Enlustment” read, “Like the rave, writing is a practice where I can go and get free, of dysphoria, of sadness, of useless desire. The work is the cum stain of its inception.” (48) There are also too many keywords, some of them quite ugly, as with “femmunism,” and with confusing definitions: “Femmunism is a subtraction. A sharing that includes the machine but not cis het masculinity, which is technically obsolete.” (33) The keywords often have too similar definitions that attempt to describe too similar sensations and scenarios—and the glossary is of little help. Just when you think you’ll get a clean definition, Wark refers to *other* keywords that are seemingly meant to help explain the concept but just create a swamp where meaning feels lost altogether. In the glossary, we find that “xeno-euphoria” is “Forms of bodily wellness achievable only through external agents, which at the same time produce euphoric states of welcome strangeness. An alternate, but not incompatible, need to *ravespace* or *enlustment* that can be derived from *constructed situations* that generate *k-time*.” (94, emphasis included) In the definition of *ravespace*, then, we find xeno-euphoria defined simply as “dissociation out of self into flesh-otherness.” (93)

It’s definitely unfair to pick and choose single sentences here and there as exemplary of an author’s writing, and it is especially challenging to do so when it comes to *Raving*, a book that pushes against the writerly conventions of the Academy to instead lean heavily on stream-of-consciousness prose. We don’t always need clean, stable definitions! But what to make of the fact that *Raving* strains against Academic investments in Knowing while remaining mired in modes of categorizing that do not always serve the text?

Given that, I often wanted more information, tightly delivered with one half sentence or an extra few lines to really land Wark's observations about the practice of raving. A more familiar structure might have helped, as the organization of the text feels haphazard, resulting in a lot of repeated content in each chapter. These unfinished yet repeated thoughts come to a head when Wark addresses black people and black culture. It's hard to ignore just how empty the repeated gesturing toward blackness feels in *Raving*. This is due in large part to how Wark frames the absence of black history within the contemporary rave scene as so commonsensical, she presumes that all readers simply "get" it, that it requires no discussion. This is a risky assumption, however, because of how she frequently uses the absent presence of black people and culture to set up white trans possibility. A representative sentence: "To be free of a world that hates us, disrespects us, misunderstands us: it's almost impossible, even in New York City. A good rave, on a good night—that is where I can feel like my body is not an anomaly, or rather: not the *only* anomaly. ... That's what a good rave makes possible. Although let's never forget we took this configuration of fugitive possibilities—from Black people." (14) The overall arc of this statement is not *not* true but the method of serving up the theory, practice, and possibilities of (trans) raving and then repeatedly pulling us back down through reminders to not forget black people and black culture, but without ever embedding a conversation about the historical relations among transness and blackness, or raving and race, simply produces an anxious white guilt around the political and aesthetic possibilities of raving that is hard to read through. The too-many and too-quick gestures to race and blackness read like “~\(\ツ)_”.

Had I not read *Raving* for the purposes of this review, I would not have thought this granularly about it. I would have read it in the way I think Wark intended it: as a kind of rave fever dream. But reading for the purposes of review, I want to consider how the very challenges of and within *Raving* are instructive, literally so. The strengths of the book will be illuminated when we use it as a teaching tool in writing-focused courses examining leisure, pleasure, and nightlife, queer and trans life, and urban ecologies. This is because *Raving* demonstrates the specific forms, possibilities, and limitations of autofiction and autotheory, which can be, as Wark herself points out, kind of annoying. That is precisely her point: "I choose terms for this writing, this practice, that are derided and ridiculed—autofiction and autotheory, as they are to genre what we transies and faggots are to gender: not to be taken too seriously." (50) I get second-hand embarrassment when people use their intimacies as the "data" with which we might understand other phenomena, which is why I hate both autofiction and autotheory. (I *really* struggled to read the last chapter, "Excessive Machine," wherein Wark's lover suddenly and relatively randomly appears in italics, responding as a lover-cum-editor to passages.)

That said, our students take autofiction and autotheory very seriously because of how they offer useful modes for locating themselves in relation to course materials, and how they can imagine and contextualize their own personal knowledge production. *Raving* should be assigned to help students theorize perspective, to stage conversations about what we (dis)count as "evidence," to balance personal experience with political economic research, to help them unlearn academic writing and tap into their own voice, and to generally encounter modes of thinking and writing that might feel truer to their own voice and their varied creative and intellectual skills. It should also be assigned to remind everyone in the classroom that we need a dose of unseriousness sometimes; that the incompleteness and messiness of intimacy and vulnerability tells us something about the concepts at play in a given text and about the writer themselves.

Indeed, the book is above all about Wark's perspective, which is an excellent reminder to students (and all of us) that the texts we read are not canon. We can think with and alongside them, we should move through them with generosity because they are not the end of ideas but representations of thinking. I can't say that I loved the whole of *Raving* but I am happy to have read something that made me feel something, anything. I can tell Wark is a real person. I can tell these are real experiences. I can imagine the sites, feel the feelings, sense the music. I can understand the longing—for music, for bodies, for thoughts—because it is embedded in the writing, imperfect as it may be for academic standards that, frankly, aren't doing much for us anyway. We write very, very boring books in the Academy. We know the language, and the style bores us to tears and yet we keep writing this way. Too often, our boring writing masks ideas that are themselves boring; ascetic writing that could only match ideas that we are so concerned with making perfect that they are devoid of feeling. There is something in *Raving* that is *almost there* and I think that almostness is more interesting and productive to think and teach with than we give credit for.

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Thank you, McKenzie. It's not easy to write a book and it's even harder to do so about partying. I appreciate the work you've put in to help us think, move, and feel alongside you.

AUTHOR BIO

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