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**'PARFUL!': Escaping the Troubles? Violence,
Sectarianism, and the Northern Irish Rave
Scene, 1989-1999.**



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**'PARFUL!': Escaping the Troubles? Violence, Sectarianism, and the
Northern Irish Rave Scene, 1989-1999.¹**

¹ Kneecap, 'Parful', *Fine Art*, (Heavenly Recordings, 2024)

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Lucy Wray, for all of her guidance and support.

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Abbreviations and Terminology:

NI: Northern Ireland

UDA: Ulster Defence Association

UVF: Ulster Volunteer Force

LVF: Loyalist Volunteer Force

IRA: Irish Republican Army

IPLO: Irish People's Liberation Organisation

INLA: Irish National Liberation Army

Ecstasy, 'Yokes': 3,4-Methylenedioxymethamphetamine, the drug.

Introduction:

The 1990s saw the Northern Irish civil conflict, known colloquially as the 'Troubles', finally draw to an official close through the 1994 Ceasefires and 1998 Good Friday Agreement.² However, the decade was not bereft of the violence and sectarianism of the previous twenty years: 607 people lost their lives as a direct result of the conflict, paramilitary violence grew into newly prominent 'vigilante' and drug-dealing roles, and intercommunity sectarian tensions remained acute and visible in conflicts such as Drumcree but also in daily life.³ And yet, in this violent and tense decade, a new rave scene flourished. This thesis retrieves and analyses the voices of the rave scene's participants, asking what it meant for thousands of young people to have taken the 'love drug' and danced in the midst of civil conflict.

Studies of subculture within the Troubles have largely surrounded the punk-rock scene, with no comprehensive history of the rave scene as yet developed.⁴ In spite of this lacuna in the literature, popular memory certainly offers its own summary of the scene, defining raves as spaces that escaped from the violence and sectarianism that existed beyond the parties' doors. This excitingly optimistic narrative of Northern Irish rave existed contemporaneously to the scene itself, with one journalist questioning whether ravers could truly 'leave their prejudices behind and join in one big happy family...known as dance culture'.⁵ This journalist's scepticism has largely been lost as the scene's mythic stature has grown. In BBC Radio Ulster's 2015 audio-documentary, *The Roots of Rave*, producer Paul McClean confidently asserted that the scene allowed 'hundreds of thousands' of youths to meet across sectarian divisions unlike 'they'd ever done in their lives', having 'life changing' experiences as a result.⁶ More recently, Belfast rap-trio Kneecap's self-titled film and accompanying album *Fine Art* further propelled an optimistic narrative of the scene into the

² Martin Melaugh, 'The Irish Peace Process - Summary', CAIN Web Service, (2006), <<https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/events/peace/sum.htm>> [accessed 20 March 2025]

³ Malcolm Sutton, 'Index of Death', CAIN Web Service, <<https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/sutton/tables/Age.html>> [accessed 06 February 2025]; Liam Kennedy, 'They Shoot Children Don't They?: An Analysis of the Age and Gender of Victims of Paramilitary "Punishments" in Northern Ireland', CAIN Web Service, <<https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/violence/docs/kennedy01.htm>> [accessed 06 February 2025]; Dominic Bryan, *Orange Parades: The Politics of Ritual, Tradition and Control*, (London: Pluto Press, 2000), pp.1-10

⁴ Sophie Anders, 'Rave as an Affective Subcultural Movement', *Writing the 'Troubles'*, <<https://writingthetroublesweb.wordpress.com/2020/04/06/rave-as-an-affective-subcultural-movement/>> [accessed 26 September 2024]

⁵ 'Arts feature: Did punk rock the Troubles?', *Fortnight*, July 1996, p.28-31

⁶ 'Stories in Sound: The Roots of Rave', *BBC Radio Ulster*, 22 February 2015, [14:10] <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b053h2b6#>> [accessed 8 October 2024]

current zeitgeist.⁷ The album and film drew extensively on the scene's myth: the song 'Parful' describing how 'rave [brought] Protestants and Catholics together' allowing them to 'forget about the divides between each other'; this positive understanding of the scene also informed the film's underlying theme of music's ability to overcome sectarian division.⁸

This thesis questions the extent to which rave lived up to this mythic narrative, whether the rave scene truly provided an escape from violence and sectarianism. It does so by creating the first rigorous study of the subculture, rooting itself in the voices, experiences, and wider reality that surrounded the scene. In doing so, the thesis demonstrates NI's rave scene as having had the potential to insulate partygoers from the Troubles' spectres of violence and sectarianism, especially within a party's temporal-spatial boundaries. However, by appreciating alternative experiences of violence, anxiety, and acceptance of division – both within and outside the rave – the thesis ultimately demonstrates that this mythical narrative occludes the scene's limitations. Instead, an accurate assessment of NI's scene must recognise how raves consistently contained manifestations of the violence beyond their doors, and how the scene's challenge to sectarianism was generally unable to sustain itself outside the party.

Literature:

In regard to histories of the Troubles, this thesis answers growing calls to push study of the conflict beyond 'elite politics, patterns of violence, and analysis of key events' by instead looking at the experiences of young people within this context.⁹ To do so, this thesis draws on the works of scholars such as Siobhan McAlister, Sara Dybris McQuaid, and Stephen Milar, each of whom have examined how residential segregation, trauma, paramilitarism, and sectarianism have impacted the everyday lives of people living through and after the conflict.¹⁰ In this subfield analysing the conflict's quotidian impact, Desmond Bell's 1990

⁷ *Kneecap*, dir. by Rich Peppiatt, (UK, 2024); *Kneecap, Fine Art*, (Heavenly Recordings, 2024)

⁸ Robin Turner, 'Kneecap - The Story So Far', *Heavenly Recordings*,
<<https://heavenlyrecordings.com/artist/kneecap/>> [accessed 07 January 2025]

⁹ Adrian Grant, 'Writing the experience of the urban working class', *Writing the 'Troubles'*,
<<https://writingthetroublesweb.wordpress.com/2018/04/30/writing-the-experience-of-the-urban-working-class/>> [accessed 26 September 2024]

¹⁰ Siobhan McAlister, et. al., 'Violence in the Lives of Children and Youth in "Post-Conflict" Northern Ireland', *Children, Youth, and Environments*, 23.1, (2013), pp. 1-22; Sara Dybris McQuaid, 'Parading Memory and Remember-ing Conflict', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 30.1, (2017), pp. 23-41; Stephen

ethnographic study of Protestant youth culture and its significance in ‘reproducing’ sectarianism has been incredibly insightful.¹¹ Bell uncovers how a ‘sectarian habitus’ governed the outlooks and subcultural activities of young Protestants in the Waterside, East Derry.¹² In particular, Bell details the role of: educational segregation, politicised territorial demarcations, and Loyalist marching bands, in developing this ‘habitus’ that normalised division and generated sectarian opinions amongst young Protestants.¹³ Bell demonstrates a similar ‘habitus’ as having affected young Catholics too.¹⁴

Beyond Northern Irish studies, the thesis draws upon analyses of rave in other spaces. A central topic in both the rave subfield and this thesis is the significance of drug-use in the scene. Philip Kavanaugh and Tammy Anderson warn scholars against excessively focussing on drug-use in raves, as doing so threatens to reduce raves solely to ‘sites of extensive drug consumption’.¹⁵ Instead, this thesis acknowledges Kavanaugh and Anderson’s suggestion to balance the undeniable significance of Ecstasy usage with an appreciation for the rave’s environment: a rave’s ability to generate ‘feelings of connectedness and spirituality’ was as reliant on Ecstasy as on the scene’s music, dancing, and other ‘collective rituals’.¹⁶

Analyses of rave have also focussed on ‘escapism’ and ‘resistance’. Scholars such as Kavanaugh and Anderson find rave’s drug usage and hedonism representative of partygoers as seeking a ‘therapeutic release’, an escape, from the pressures of the world outside the rave.¹⁷ Steve Redhead emphasises how rave’s escapism can be further analysed as resistive, himself arguing that the mainland-British scene’s hedonism was distinctly resistive in the face of post-Thatcherite ‘moral regulation’.¹⁸ This thesis similarly seeks to identify escapist motivations amongst ravers, and to question the resistive power of those feelings.

Milar, ‘Let Us Entertain You: Paramilitary Songs and the Politics of Loyalist Cultural Production in Northern Ireland’, *Race & Class*, 63.4, (2022), pp. 9-34

¹¹ Desmond Bell, *Acts of Union: Youth Culture and Sectarianism in Northern Ireland*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990)

¹² Ibid, p.51

¹³ Ibid, p.109; p.55; p.90

¹⁴ Ibid, p.9; p.30; p.135

¹⁵ Philip R. Kavanaugh, Tammy L. Anderson, ‘Solidarity and Drug Use in the Electronic Dance Music Scene’, *The Sociological Quarterly*, 49.1, (2008), pp. 181-208, p.182

¹⁶ Ibid, p.182

¹⁷ Ibid, p.184

¹⁸ Steve Redhead, *Rave Off: Politics and Deviance in Contemporary Youth Culture*, (Aldershot: Avebury, 1993), p.7

Literature approaching raves as ‘heterotopias’ has also informed my approach. The term was coined by Michel Foucault, defining ‘counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which...all the other real sites that can be found within the (parent) culture are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted’.¹⁹ Henry R. L. John reads the spaces of the mainland-British rave scene as heterotopias, using the term to highlight rave’s inversion of Thatcherite moralism and social atomisation through drug use and communitarianism, yet simultaneous representation of the Thatcherite ‘value of entrepreneurship’ in rave organisers’ profit-seeking motives.²⁰ Heterotopic analyses of rave also appear implicitly in the works of Sarah Thornton, Polly Withers, and Silvia Rief.²¹ Each scholar has investigated the possibility for raves to enable explorations of new gender dynamics, particularly a more publicly sensual femininity; yet raves simultaneously appear governed by hegemonic gender hierarchies that define women as less ‘authentic’ in their enjoyment of the rave, for Thornton, or force women to disassociate from these liberated identities as a rave draws to its inevitable close, for Withers and Rief.²² This thesis will similarly assess NI’s rave scene through this heterotopic lens, analysing how ravers seemingly rejected *and* were governed by the wider Troubles context the scene occurred in.

Finally, in terms of specific literature analysing Northern Irish rave, only a handful of works exist. Maria-Adriana Deiana has comparatively analysed rave in 1990s Belfast with the scene in besieged-Sarajevo, using the scenes connectively to demonstrate the utility of dancing as a methodological lens to ‘dispel war’s totalizing shadow’ over every-day experiences in conflict zones.²³ This study similarly seeks to uncover quotidian experiences of war, however it focusses on historicising NI’s scene alone and in greater specific detail than Deiana’s comparative approach.

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias’, translated by Jay Miskowiec, *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité*, 5.1 (1984), pp.46-55, p.49

²⁰ Henry R. L. John, ‘UK Rave Culture and the Thatcherite Hegemony, 1988–94’, *Cultural History*, 4.2, (2015), pp. 162-186, p.174

²¹ Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995); Polly Withers, ‘Ramallah ravers and Haifa hipsters: gender, class, and nation in Palestinian popular culture’, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 48.1, (2021), pp. 94-113; Silvia Rief, *Club Cultures: Boundaries, Identities and Otherness*, (Oxfordshire: Taylor & Francis: 2009)

²² Thornton, p.99; Withers, p.107; Rief, p.125

²³ Maria-Adriana Deiana, ‘Dance as a register of war: following unruly bodies, affects, and sounds in conflict’, *Critical Military Studies*, 10.1, (2022), pp. 462-484, p.479

Noel McLaughlin has analysed the scene's musical impact, arguing rave constituted a 'clearing of the decks' in popularising electronic music and displacing the traditional musical dominance of folk, rock, and punk across the Irish landmass.²⁴ In terms of the actual experiences of the scene, McLaughlin briefly considers rave's effect on sectarianism, but his analysis is fairly thin – only utilising DJ David Holmes' retrospective description of cross-community audiences at raves, and offering little further analysis.²⁵

Finally, Brian Hollywood has examined the significance of the rave scene and its drug usage in generating a 'moral panic' in NI's post-ceasefire media.²⁶ Hollywood demonstrates how media sensationalism resulted in a broader villainization of rave as newspapers seamlessly transferred widely held fears around drug-use into a panic around the entire scene; Hollywood argues that the rabidity of this sensationalism stemmed from the media's search for a new 'topic of panic' as the ceasefires had reduced the availability of the familiar news item of conflict violence.²⁷ Hollywood's research, alongside my own analysis of media, has proved particularly useful in contextualising the fears of ravers 'on the ground'.

Methodology:

This thesis examines the experiences of ravers from both Protestant and Catholic communities, living across NI, and participating in the rave scene in the years 1989-1999.

The decade of 1989-1999 spans the 'height' of the rave scene in NI. Rave's arrival in Britain is traced to 1989 and the importation of Chicago-drawn 'Acid House' (as rave music was first known) by British DJs returning from Ibiza.²⁸ Participants of NI's scene confirm the music's rapid spread to the province, and its sustained popularity for the whole decade.²⁹

²⁴ Noel McLaughlin, 'Bodies swayed to music: dance culture in Ireland', *Irish Studies Review*, 12.1, (2004), pp. 77-85, p.80

²⁵ Ibid, p.82

²⁶ Brian Hollywood, 'Dancing in the Dark: Ecstasy, the Dance Culture, and Moral Panic in Post Ceasefire Northern Ireland', *Critical Criminology*, 8.1, (1997), pp. 62-77

²⁷ Ibid, p.62

²⁸ Ben Jones, Geo Walker Churchman, "'It was like a big union': emotional communities, working-class subjectivities and the popular memory of acid house and rave", *Contemporary British History*, 38.4, (2024), pp. 680-699, p.687

²⁹ aBitConfused_NWO, 'What was the Acid house/rave scene like in Northern Ireland (late 80s/early 90s)', Reddit, (2022), <https://www.reddit.com/r/northernireland/comments/zhz1l3/what_was_the_acid_houserave_scene_like_in/> [accessed 15 November 2024], (hereafter 'Reddit (a)')

The choice to include the voices of ravers from ‘both’ communities has been informed by the scene’s cross-community participation.³⁰ Similarly, ravers came from across NI, commonly travelling in cars, taxis, and buses beyond their typical locale.³¹ To analyse only one community or geography would betray the scene’s characteristics, and arbitrarily limit the range of voices available for the first detailed analysis of ravers’ experiences.

However, it should be noted that the majority of identifiable ravers were from largely single-community areas within either Derry or Belfast, and there were no voices identifiably from rural or mixed communities. As such, the study can confidently represent the experiences of the former ravers, but cannot have full confidence in representing the latter group’s potentially unheard voices.

In terms of approach, this thesis uses a ‘War Through Other Stuff’ (WTOS) approach.³² WTOS, as developed by Lucie Whitmore and Laura Harrison, seeks to represent non-combatants’ experiences of war, retrieving the instances where their ‘voices have been lost or...experiences overwritten’.³³ WTOS utilises ‘non-conventional sources’ to generate ‘alternative narratives’ to the political and violence-dominated histories that proliferate in studies of conflict spaces.³⁴ This WTOS approach informed my choice to have a wide and varied source base. Within this base, Desmond Bell’s and Karen McElrath’s primary studies of NI’s rave scene and of Ecstasy usage, respectively, have been instrumental in retrieving the contemporary voices of NI’s ravers.³⁵ Alongside these contemporary voices, retrospective accounts of the scene have been found in interviews, audio-documentaries, and social media discussions. Whilst these sources offer memories of the scene, and have a propensity to occlude its negative aspects, when handled accordingly they too are hugely useful in providing insight into people’s experiences of raving.

³⁰ Karen McElrath, Kieran McEvoy, *Ecstasy Use in Northern Ireland: A Qualitative Study*, (Belfast: Stationary Office, 1999), p.30

³¹ Ibid, p.6

³² Lucie Whitmore, Laura S. Harrison, ‘Beyond the can(n)on: what is ‘war through other stuff’?’, *Critical Military Studies*, 7.4, (2021), pp. 361-366

³³ Ibid, p.362

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ *Dancing on Narrow Ground: Youth & Dance in Ulster*, dir. by Desmond Bell, (Channel 4, 1995), <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzo-42PpFLQ>> [accessed 10 October 2024]; McElrath, McEvoy

The Linen Hall Library's as yet academically unused *Divided Society* digitised archive and *The Irish Times* digitised archive have also been used.³⁶ These archives offer contemporary media opinion on rave, often providing contextual information in turn, with sources ranging from popular broadsheets to small-scale local newsletters. I approached these databases with awareness of the methodological dangers associated with digitised archives that Adrian Bingham and Lara Putnam have raised: namely the issues of 'word-searching' newspapers at the expense of developing the deep place-specific knowledge gained in the laborious navigation of physical newspapers.³⁷ To overcome these issues of 'side-glancing' into archival material with which one does not have true contextual familiarity, I used an extensive range of search terms: varying from the more general and inaccurate 'disco' and 'drugs', to the earlier 'Acid House' and misspelt 'Ecstasy', to the lasting descriptors of 'rave' and 'Ecstasy' (amongst others). I also 'read' whole issues of flagged papers, helping to develop more contextual knowledge specific to that source and locale.

A final awareness within my approach was to acknowledge sectarianism as a systematic, rather than interpersonal, issue. Desmond Bell stresses that scholars must purposefully reject the common misunderstanding, and occasional malicious distortion, of sectarianism as a 'personal prejudice'.³⁸ Bell suggests two central flaws in this approach: first, it fundamentally ignores the complex and historical roots of sectarianism in political developments stemming as far back as the plantation of Ulster; and second, that it 'conspires with 'official' definitions of sectarianism' by 'deflecting attention from the political realm' and scapegoating 'the working-class child, or his/her culture, community and 'traditions'' as the '*origin* of sectarian conflict'.³⁹ Thus, this approach is not only historically inaccurate, but also dangerously upholds views of 'irrational prejudice' and 'tribalism' as innate to Northern Irish society.⁴⁰ In recognition of Bell's assessment, this thesis adopts a

³⁶ Belfast, *The Linen Hall Library*, 'Divided Society: Northern Ireland 1990-1998', <<https://www.dividedsociety.org/>>; *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*, 'The Irish Times', <<https://www.proquest.com/hnp/irish-times>>

³⁷ Lara Putnam, 'The Transnational and the Text-Searchable: Digitized Sources and the Shadows They Cast', *The American Historical Review*, 121.2, (2016), pp. 337-402; Adrian Bingham, 'The Digitization of Newspaper Archives: Opportunities and Challenges for Historians', *Twentieth Century British History*, 21:2 (2010), pp. 225-231

³⁸ Bell, p.149

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Ibid, p.204

systemic understanding of sectarianism and insists that where it deals with personal manifestations of sectarian attitudes it does not condemn these individuals as deficient in character or as personally *causing* sectarianism. However, individual behaviours were nonetheless problematic in representing and *reproducing* sectarianism, and therefore will be analysed to demonstrate this.

Structure:

The thesis is structured to investigate the two central characteristics that popular memory defines NI's rave scene by: its ability to offer an escape from the Troubles violence, and its ability to overcome sectarian division.

The first chapter initially explores the scene's spatial-temporal characteristics and how these characteristics made raves feel 'outside' the real world. The chapter then analyses ravers' escapist motivations, before questioning the true extent to which ravers were insulated from the broader violent context of the Troubles that awaited outside the doors.

The second chapter assesses whether raves truly were spaces to explore transgressive identities and relationships, specifically cross-community connections. The chapter then critically analyses the lasting impact of these relationships, questioning whether most participants felt these experiences were genuine, and whether they prompted lasting changes to their attitudes.

Chapter One:

The extent to which raves were able to provide an escape from the Troubles' violence was dependent on the spaces parties occurred in. NI's rave scene operated in both rural and urban spaces. Participants' described nights partying on 'random farms', 'derelict buildings', the 'sand dunes at Portrush', the '[Tardree Forest]' near Antrim, and the 'Black Mountain' and Divis hills to the West of Belfast.⁴¹ Ravers also recalled urban venues such as 'Giro's', 'Vico's', the Art College, the Ulster Hall, all in Belfast; 'Kelly's' in Portrush; 'Circus Circus' in Banbridge, and others.⁴² Within both these urban and rural parties, ravers were offered what Silvia Rief terms a 'play-reality' – a feeling of the party as existing 'outside' the normal world.⁴³ This feeling was dependent on the otherworldly nature of the party, a surrealism developed through a rave's audio-visual, temporal, and pharmacological characteristics.⁴⁴

Audio-visually, raves occurred in huge darkened rooms that became packed with erratically moving sweaty bodies, only occasionally revealed by lights that strobed in time to hypnotically rhythmic beats.⁴⁵ Seeing, hearing, and engaging in this activity was drastically alien to the sights, sounds, and movements of daily life.⁴⁶ Temporally, the late-night nature of most raves fundamentally severed the party from the normal world and its basis in day-time hours.⁴⁷ Pharmacologically, Ecstasy usage was central to 1990s raves, globally and in NI's individual scene.⁴⁸ The drug produces 'pro-social' effects, heightening feelings of empathy and 'solidarity' with others.⁴⁹ This empathetic connectivity is enhanced when the drug is taken *en masse*, and when users are offered a shared 'driving stimuli' (such as the music and lights of a rave) that furthers feelings of being synchronised with strangers.⁵⁰ NI's ravers recalled these effects, emphasising the abnormality of their 'almost...electrical connections' with each other, feeling free to be 'a lot more open' with strangers than they

⁴¹ PersonalitySafe1810; Xephon-70, Reddit (a); 'Roots of Rave', [01:30; 02:15]

⁴² PersonalitySafe1810; Xephon-70; _Soviet_Cats, Reddit (a)

⁴³ Rief, p.94

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ Rief, p.111-113

⁴⁶ Ibid, p.113

⁴⁷ Thornton, p.28

⁴⁸ McElrath, McEvoy p.28

⁴⁹ Kavanaugh, Anderson, p.182

⁵⁰ Kavanaugh, Anderson, p.182

could with people they knew in daily life.⁵¹ Partygoers marvelled at how they became a 'friend to the world', 'hugging everybody', and 'shaking hands...with everybody'.⁵² Such sociability and closeness with strangers further created a sharp contrast with the reserved politeness of the normal world.⁵³



Fig. 1 - *Narrow Ground*, [30:27; 33:16]

Thus, the audio-visual, temporal, and pharmacological characteristics of NI's raves – every tangible aspect of the scene's 'environment' – made the spaces feel markedly different to daily life, and therefore created a 'play-reality'.

Rief identifies an attraction to this play-reality as a common motivation amongst ravers, and argues that it is representative of their desires for escapism.⁵⁴ Indeed, many participants of NI's scene described escapism as their key motivation to rave. In some accounts, ravers sought escapism from a generalised dissatisfaction with life. 'Greer', from Orangefield, East Belfast, explained how 'most of [a] week' he experienced 'downers' and felt 'sick of it and fed up with it', but he suggested one rave could provide lasting reprieve from his depressive feelings 'for a couple of weeks'.⁵⁵ 'Andrew', 'John', and 'David', three ravers from the Waterside, East Derry, likewise described rave as the 'only' activity to 'look forward to', that there was 'f**k all' to look forward to in the Waterside, and that they used 'drugs to escape' from their discontent.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Respondent 108; Respondent 015, quoted in Karen McElrath, Kieran McEvoy, *Ecstasy Use in Northern Ireland: A Qualitative Study*, (Belfast: Stationary Office, 1999), p.19 (hereafter I will only provide Respondent and page numbers)

⁵² Respondent 201, p.29; Respondent 304, p.38

⁵³ Rief, p.113

⁵⁴ Ibid, p.111-113

⁵⁵ *Narrow Ground*, [18:40]

⁵⁶ 'Young Views', *Waterside Voices*, Spring 1993, pp.29-30

Whilst these accounts described an unspecified dissatisfaction as being escaped in the rave's play-reality, other accounts specified these escapist desires as directly prompted by the Troubles. 'Barso', from Lenadoon, South West Belfast, evoked similarly general ideas of young people in Lenadoon as 'stuck' and looking to 'escape from the pressures of everyday life'.⁵⁷ However, Barso also specified that young people's escapist desires were prompted by the 'gloomy' nature of conflict-ridden Belfast and the 'craziness' of looking at 'people with guns [for] 24 hours'.⁵⁸ Retrospective accounts further clarify escapism from the Troubles as the primary motivator for many ravers. DJ David Holmes described how 'people were crying on the dancefloor – literal tears of happiness', specifying that this was 'because of what was going on politically', that the violence of the Troubles had 'manifested' in peoples' 'psyches' through experiences of people 'being shot on your fucking doorstep' being 'fresh and raw'.⁵⁹ Holmes therefore emphasised that rave's ability to provide escapism from *trauma* was the central motivation in the scene. Indeed, Holmes stressed that raves provided a genuinely insulated escape from this trauma; he asserted that people spent 'Monday to Saturday living in fear and paranoia', but that once people entered a rave these emotional burdens 'disappeared'.⁶⁰ Glen Molloy, then a DJ, similarly emphasised the rave as this space completely removed from trauma – that Ecstasy and rave meant 'all your troubles were away for a few hours'.⁶¹

Contemporary accounts confirm the presence of this trauma, and the attachment to rave as a space 'away' from violence and emotional turmoil. At various points in *Narrow Ground*, the ravers explained their traumas. Barso detailed how 'a couple of mates' had been killed by Security Forces whilst driving stolen cars; 'Lav', also from Lenadoon, knew three people 'shot dead' in the conflict; 'Jonny', from Orangefield, had lost his Prison Officer father during a breakout in HM Prison Maze.⁶² Such trauma was almost certainly common amongst ravers. More than 500,000 people considered their lives 'profoundly damaged' by the conflict in 2018.⁶³ That such present-day trauma would have existed amongst ravers is highly likely,

⁵⁷ *Narrow Ground*, [10:02]

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, [10:05]

⁵⁹ Daniel Dylan Wray, 'Sugar Sweet: the pill-up rave that united Belfast during the Troubles', *The Guardian*, 01 January 2020, <<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/jan/01/sugar-sweet-rave-united-belfast-david-holmes-iain-mccready>> [accessed 09 November 2025]

⁶⁰ *Ibid*

⁶¹ 'Roots of Rave', [19:55]

⁶² *Narrow Ground*, [10:50]; [05:02]; [05:35]

⁶³ McAlister, p.2

especially upon considering that most ravers (with an average age of 21) were members of the 'Troubles generation' – they had been born 'into' the conflict and its violence had constantly been *the* governing force of life, an inescapable fact.⁶⁴

Ravers expressed great attachment to the party's offer of escape from these traumas, despite the limited actual effect of the activity. Barso described raves as an opportunity to 'get you away for a while', and that whilst no genuine change was generated, the easy answer was to 'go away next Saturday'.⁶⁵ Ravers also emphasised how long-term consequences of Ecstasy use did worry them, but they '[weighed] it up', and, 'like asking a smoker if he realises [cigarettes] could kill him', they concluded that escaping trauma was of more value than potential health consequences.⁶⁶ Indeed, indicative of this attachment to Ecstasy and raving seemingly 'whatever the cost', it's notable that a remarkably high number (44%) of NI's Ecstasy users surveyed in 1999 were 'heavy users' who had used the drug more than one hundred times.⁶⁷ These insights into ravers' traumas, the markedly high rate of 'heavy' Ecstasy usage in NI, and the apathy surrounding the consequences of this drug usage, collectively confirm raving as a desperately sought activity due to its ability to provide reprieve from the Troubles' emotional torment.

Whilst this may prompt a reading of rave as an ephemeral, self-medicating response to trauma, I suggest that this escapism held more subversive power than solely short-term relief. Neil Nehring calls for scholars to seek more empowering readings of escapism, himself drawing on Tony Wilson's (the founder-manager of the Hacienda nightclub) emphasis on how the Manchester rave scene held 'power in people being lovely to each other', Nehring using Wilson's idea to explore escapism as resistive to Thatcherite social atomisation rhetoric.⁶⁸ Timothy Heron has similarly emphasised how the power of 'singing about love in a conflict-ridden society should not be underestimated' in respect to NI's punk rock scene.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ McElrath, McEvoy, p.1; Bell, p.23

⁶⁵ *Narrow Ground*, [15:31]

⁶⁶ Respondent 017, p.61

⁶⁷ McElrath, p.10

⁶⁸ Neil Nehring, "'Everyone's Given Up and Just Wants to Go Dancing': From Punk to Rave in the Thatcher Era", *Popular Music and Society*, 30.1, (2007), pp. 1-18, p.15; Quoted in 'Stark Raving Madchester', *Newsweek*, 22 July 1990

⁶⁹ Timothy Heron, "'Alternative Ulster': The First Wave of Punk in Northern Ireland (1976-1983)", *Estudes Anglaises*, 71.1, (2018), pp. 67-84, p.81

In light of these empowered readings, Northern Irish ravers' escapism from trauma can be proved as resistive to a driving logic fuelling the conflict – grievance.

The significance of trauma in perpetuating the Troubles' violence has been explored by Sarah Campbell, Kevin Hearty, and Sara Dybris McQuaid through the concepts of 'memory politics' and 'grievance frameworks'.⁷⁰ These scholars explain how past traumas are manipulated by paramilitary groups and political forces through grievance frameworks that assert one community's suffering as more significant, and as caused by the 'other'.⁷¹ In the name of these manipulated traumas, 'responsibilities' are generated for future generations to 'reinforce exclusive...identities' and communities, thus sustaining the imbittered alienation between NI's communities that makes paramilitary groups appear necessary for safety.⁷² If rave did offer even momentary escape from these manipulable traumas then the scene certainly gains a powerfully 'resistive' character.

Barso demonstrates that rejecting grievance was indeed a potential outcome of rave. Barso described how a friend had become so 'bitter' and drawn into the grievance frameworks underpinning the conflict that he was 'going to be a [I]RA man'.⁷³ However the friend's experience raving saw him 'gradually, gradually' change to the point that he had 'no interest in politics whatsoever' and had fallen away from his paramilitary trajectory.⁷⁴ Barso believed that rave had 'done [this] to a lot of people' and was 'changing people's opinions on life, definitely', precisely because it had caused them not to 'care no more'.⁷⁵ Rave's offer of apathy and escapism was resistive to a conflict fuelled by grievance.

Overall then, the rave scene was certainly coloured by desires for escapism from the Troubles, and many ravers account the scene as having genuinely given them this detachment from trauma. Moreover, this escapism could prove, for some ravers, to

⁷⁰ Sarah Campbell, 'We Are the People' Protestant Identity and Collective Action in Northern Ireland, 1968-1985', in *The Troubles in Northern Ireland and Theories of Social Movements*, ed. by Lorenzo Bosi and Gianluca De Fazio, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), pp. 91-110; Kevin Hearty, 'A Shared Narrative? A Case Study of the Contested Legacy of Policing in the North of Ireland', *The British Journal of Criminology*, 54.6, (2014), pp. 1047-1066; McQuaid

⁷¹ Hearty, p.1054; Campbell, p.106; McQuaid, p.24-27

⁷² Campbell, p.106; McQuaid, p.24-27; Milar, p.12

⁷³ *Narrow Ground*, [56:25]

⁷⁴ Ibid

⁷⁵ Ibid

genuinely challenge the logic of grievance and bitterness that in part underpinned the conflict.

However, this narrative does not universally represent ravers' experiences. For many, whilst escapist desires may have existed, raves' containment of violence and the resultant development of anxiety denied their legitimacy as a 'play-reality' genuinely offering escape from these issues. It is through demonstrating this heterotopic character of the scene, its rejection *and* representation of violence, that simplified positive narratives become inaccurate.

Analysing the sources of the Ecstasy so integral to the scene immediately disrupts this optimistic image of the rave as insulated from the Troubles. As early as 1991 the Ecstasy trade in NI was controlled and operated by Loyalist and Republican paramilitaries.⁷⁶ Although the Provisional IRA was largely uninvolved, smaller Republican paramilitaries such as the IPLO and INLA, alongside all major Loyalist groups, were involved in the trade, with the British government estimating the UVF and UDA alone generated over one million pounds from drugs in 1991.⁷⁷

The paramilitary takeover of the Ecstasy market brought violence into the rave scene. A former drug-dealer described how Loyalist paramilitaries first extorted drug-dealers within raves by intimidating them into forfeiting their funds; however, paramilitaries soon realised that 'easy money...could be made' and began operating within venues themselves.⁷⁸ Ravers described how this led to 'drug-dealers...fighting with each other' in clubs, and how things 'started turning nasty' and 'began to get messy' when paramilitaries entered raves.⁷⁹ A 1995 article in Derry art journal *City Lights* similarly reported 'Loyalist paramilitary involvement in a Portrush night-club' and 'guns being held by dealers at raves', whilst also emphasising how these dangerous presences clearly undermined the narrative of rave as a 'rosy...perfumed garden' insulated from the Troubles.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ 'Roots of Rave', [20:55]

⁷⁷ Andrew Silke, 'Drink, Drugs, and Rock'n'Roll: Financing Loyalist Terrorism in Northern Ireland – Part Two', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 23.2, (2000), pp. 107-127, p.114-116; p.112

⁷⁸ Quoted in Silke, p.113

⁷⁹ Respondent 017, p.45; PersonalitySafe1810, Reddit (a)

⁸⁰ Karen Devine, *City Lights*, 'Shangri-La or Derry Men on Drugs', August 1995, p.26

This violent presence did not solely endanger drug-dealers. As paramilitary organisations, these groups were prepared to carry out ‘political’ crimes alongside typical criminality. Indeed, many of these drug-related paramilitaries, most notably the INLA and the LVF, were responsible for some of the most ruthless and random sectarian killings of the entire conflict.⁸¹ One such sectarian murder that occurred within a rave was that of Margaret Wright, who was killed by Loyalist paramilitants in a Protestant community’s ‘band hall’ hosting ‘mini-raves’ on Donegall Road, West Belfast.⁸² Margaret’s murder directly demonstrates the thinness of rave’s supposed insulation from the Troubles’ dangers: Margaret was mistaken as a Catholic by members of a Loyalist paramilitary, a mistake that impinged precisely on the band hall hosting both Protestant and Catholic ravers.⁸³

Such cases also made young people aware of the limitations of rave’s escapist ‘safety’. One raver recalled how the murder ‘really affected’ them, not just because Margaret ‘was a woman and the brutality of the crime’, but also because their ‘friends used to go’ to the band hall, ‘some of them Catholic’ – prompting them to think ‘that it could easily have been them’.⁸⁴ Such anxiety and awareness of the scene’s danger was not limited to this individual, with the Reddit post in which they asked for recollections of the murder receiving 96 responses in 2023 – indicating that the murder was of such prominence in 1994 that its memory is able to elicit significant reactions nearly three decades later.⁸⁵ The presence and actions of paramilitaries therefore questions the actual extent that raves provided escape from the Troubles, whilst the anxiety this violence generated amongst ravers demonstrates how escapism could not be experienced by all – even *within* raves.

As a consequence of the sectarian tension and violence within parties, some participants’ anxieties grew such that their approach to raves was *governed* by the conflict’s dangers. For example, some partygoers chose to only attend venues they anticipated to be ‘trouble free’.⁸⁶ Barso gives insight into how this was defined. Barso described how he had previously attended Kelly’s, in Portrush, when it was ‘50-50 [per cent] Catholics-Protestants’ and he had

⁸¹ Silke, p.114-116

⁸² Gerry Moriarty, ‘Killers may have thought victim was Catholic’, *The Irish Times*, 8 April 1994, p.6

⁸³ Ibid

⁸⁴ keltictrigger, ‘Margaret Wright Murder’, Reddit, (2023), <https://www.reddit.com/r/northernireland/comments/13wy0rv/margaret_wright_murder/> [accessed 4 March 2025]

⁸⁵ Ibid

⁸⁶ Respondent 212, p.31

felt safe surrounded by 'loads of Catholics, everybody [he] knew from Lenadoon, [and the] Falls Road'; but as the club's demographic gained more Protestants Barso would no longer attend, stating he felt unsafe without his 'own people' there.⁸⁷ Barso also contextualised his aversion to attending a night in Kelly's due to one rave occurring in the week after the 'Twelfth' (the annual Unionist celebration of the Battle of the Boyne), which Barso saw as the 'boiling point' of community tension and thus indicative of a high likelihood of violence.⁸⁸ Thus, these ravers who prioritised a 'trouble free' experience navigated *where* and *when* they could rave in strict accordance with the political and violent context surrounding them, therefore distinctly not seeing the scene as an insulated escape from the Troubles.

Sectarian issues also confronted participants in the broader context that surrounded a rave. One raver, '212', described feeling 'fucked...up the whole night' after a group from 'Tigers Bay', North Belfast, boarded his bus to a party.⁸⁹ 212's discomfort stemmed from the group wearing 'Rangers tops' (a Glasgow football team often supported by Unionists/Loyalists), having 'UVF...tattoos', and singing 'Billy Boys' on the bus:

"Hello, Hello
We are the Billy Boys
Hello, Hello
You'll know us by our noise
We're up to our knees in Fenian blood
Surrender or you'll die
For we are
The Brighton Derry Billy Boys".⁹⁰

This conglomeration of clothing, tattoos, and sectarian chanting aggravated 212 and his group feared a violent confrontation.⁹¹ 212's experience therefore demonstrates journeys to raves could also contain the sectarian tensions present in daily life. Further analysing this broadened view of the activity continues to challenge the extent of escapism that rave truly offered.

⁸⁷ *Narrow Ground*, [47:20]

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, [46:05]

⁸⁹ Respondent 212, p.31

⁹⁰ *Ibid*; 'The Bitter Divide', *BBC News*, 2 June 1999; Bell, p.112-113

⁹¹ Respondent 208, p.43

Moving to the time after a rave, the previous tendency for planning of parties to be governed by the Troubles context appeared far more commonly in regard to afterparties. Ravers stressed that these parties were pre-planned and contained only pre-established friendship groups, people with whom a shared community background ensured a confirmation of safety.⁹² When offered unplanned afterparties outside of these groups, participants were made abruptly aware of the weakness of rave's insulation from the Troubles' violence. For example, when a Catholic girl offered Greer, from the majority-Protestant area of Orangefield, to go home with her, Greer rejected this on the grounds that it 'just wouldn't work'.⁹³ Jonny was similarly offered to 'go back to a party' in 'New Lodge', a majority-Catholic district North of Belfast city centre, but similarly rejected the offer and explained how if he invited the group back to Orangefield 'they wouldn't come back' either.⁹⁴ Jonny explained that both these rejections were informed by fears of sectarian violence, specifically pointing to the murder of a Catholic woman, Anne-Marie Smyth, who was killed by Loyalist paramilitants after going home with people she met in a bar on the 'Castlereagh Road'.⁹⁵ Popular magazine *Fortnight* confirmed the commonality of this danger, reporting in 1996 that rave-afterparties were a case of 'sometimes being lucky, sometimes not': a gamble on getting 'home without incident' or suffering sectarian violence like Anne-Marie.⁹⁶ Thus, murders like Anne-Marie's that occurred following malicious, or genuine, invites into an area of the 'opposing' community were real, publicised, and known dangers. In turn, these dangers and their resultant anxieties distinctly affected ravers' behaviour after a party.

Without an afterparty and faced with a walk home after a rave, Troubles-drawn anxieties continued to dictate ravers' experiences. Participants described their hatred for 'coming out of clubs' and having 'no taxis' to take them home, therefore faced with the danger of moving through the 'other' community's areas, one raver stating that 'in a Protestant area you would be worried if you were a Catholic and vice versa'.⁹⁷ Barso shared this anxiety and recounted how he was constantly 'looking over [his] shoulder' in fear of cars containing 'the

⁹² Respondent 118, p.27; Respondent 204, p.33

⁹³ *Narrow Ground*, [16:12]

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, [16:45]

⁹⁵ *Ibid*; Ciaran Barnes, 'Serial Killer Uel 'Cookie' Cooke and the brutal murder of Anne-Marie Smyth', Belfast Telegraph Podcast, 20 October 2024, <<https://open.spotify.com/episode/19jFh00G8RTgig5LwTuU4r>> [accessed 20 February 2025]

⁹⁶ 'Arts Feature: Did punk rock the Troubles?', *Fortnight*, July 1996, pp.28-31

⁹⁷ Respondent 123, p.30; Respondent 108, p.45

UV[F]' approaching and attacking him, asserting that 'everyone' was similarly in fear on these walks home.⁹⁸ Barso also emphasised how a rave's nighttime context worsened this fear by ensuring 'nobody would know' if he was attacked: a temporal characteristic which enabled raves to be a 'play-reality' was now limiting escapism by worsening anxieties and danger.⁹⁹ Therefore collectively, ravers' navigated the space immediately after a party with immense fear of sectarian violence. Their anxieties not only pushed them to reject ad-hoc afterparty offers that raised the potential for danger, but also created a general state of distress when walking home. As such, again the ability for raves to offer partygoers a 'play-reality' insulated from the Troubles was highly limited, worsening the moment a rave ended.

In conclusion to this chapter, by appreciating the anxiety-laden experiences of ravers, and the real instances of violence that informed their fears, the extent to which the scene genuinely provided insulation from the Troubles' violence is highly limited. Instead of legitimately providing safety from the Troubles, the scene heterotopically represented these dangers internally, and was a far more precarious 'escape' than myth indicates. Whilst the scene nonetheless did offer some ravers a reprieve from trauma, which could resist the perpetuation of grievance, this escapism was not experienced by all. Many ravers' experiences before, within, and after raves were governed by their Troubles-drawn anxieties rather than being relinquished of them.

⁹⁸ *Narrow Ground*, [04:35]

⁹⁹ *Ibid*

Chapter Two:

This chapter assesses the extent to which raves provided young people an opportunity to form relationships in spite of the sectarian divisions between Protestant and Catholic communities 'outside' the rave.

Sectarian division had proliferated throughout the Troubles and, like violence, was a constant reality for these ravers who were part of the 'Troubles generation'.¹⁰⁰ For example, supposedly temporary 'peace walls' that emerged in the 1970s to divide Protestant- and Catholic-majority areas and reduce violence between them were constant features of the landscape of this generation; those in rural areas had similarly, albeit less structurally, been raised with intercommunity tension as a constant reality of life.¹⁰¹

Ravers testify to the effects of this separation, describing how being from a 'Protestant-Loyalist area' meant you 'wouldn't have much dealings with Catholics', how they were raised to not be 'into religious mixing' and were 'never supposed to meet' members of the 'other' community, and how many of them had presumed that innate differences based on community background killed the feasibility of relationships across the divide.¹⁰² These ravers' voices confirm how a 'sectarian habitus' was ingrained in them, discouraging the defiance of sectarian divisions by making them feel they were not supposed to cross these boundaries and that young people from each community were innately different.¹⁰³

That rave might have held the power to overcome such division, to be a 'peacebuilding' activity, is not implausible. Lesley Pruitt and Erica Jeffery emphasise that empathy is the 'key emotion to address in the aim of peacebuilding'.¹⁰⁴ As aforementioned, empathy was the emotion that defined rave environments. Ecstasy stimulated empathic feelings as people's inhibitions were reduced and they experience heightened connection and solidarity with others; whilst Pruitt and Jeffery's own work emphasises the power of dance as an activity that further stimulates empathy by making people feel connected as they respond

¹⁰⁰ Bell, p.159

¹⁰¹ Ibid; Sally Browne, 'Northern Ireland's fragile peace: how the Troubles paused and mutated since its official "end" in 1998', *Journal of Global Faultlines*, 6.2, (2020), pp. 215-236, p.216

¹⁰² Respondent 205, p.44; Respondent 117, p.44; 'Roots of Rave', [26:30]

¹⁰³ Bell, p.159

¹⁰⁴ Lesley J. Pruitt, Erica Rose Jeffery, *Dancing Through the Dissonance: Creative Movement and Peacebuilding*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), p.167

‘collectively’ to music.¹⁰⁵ Polly Withers has similarly analysed how Ecstasy and dancing’s combined enhancement of empathy makes raves spaces where people explore ‘unconventional identities’, their identities becoming less rigidly defined ‘against’ others, and participants therefore becoming more open to relationships that are discouraged by divisions in daily life.¹⁰⁶

NI’s ravers did testify to rave’s ability to ‘peacebuild’ and generate relationships across division. Participants described the scene as bereft of ‘animosity’ and ‘fighting’ between communities, often expressing surprise at how ‘nobody [cared] what religion’ people were: this surprise demonstrating the novelty of rave’s offer of cross-community relationships in comparison to the division outside.¹⁰⁷ Ravers also emphasised how the practice of ‘telling’ (the effort to identify what community someone was from to assess whether you were safe around them, or to instigate violence on account of difference) was stripped of its tense context; instead when ravers asked people ‘where are you from’ and discovered a person was from the ‘other’ community they would nonetheless ‘[shake] their hands and all’, engage in connective behaviour with them.¹⁰⁸

Some ravers felt these connections held powerful potential to genuinely overcome division. Participants referred to how a ‘couple of Es’ thrown into peace talks had the potential to ‘sort out a few problems’.¹⁰⁹ Other ravers described the scene as doing ‘more for the peace process than pretty much anything’, or of rave metaphorically ‘brought’ to NI to ‘stop them...from shooting each other’ by bringing communities ‘together’.¹¹⁰ One small-scale drug-dealer even suggested that the ‘[I]RA [saw] their next generation of freedom fighters disappearing before their eyes’ because ravers would not ‘be interested in their...cause’ after forging cross-community relationships.¹¹¹ Indeed, some participants’ rave-formed relationships did generate lasting changes to previously divisive behaviour and

¹⁰⁵ Kavanaugh, Anderson, p.190; Pruitt, Jeffery p.167

¹⁰⁶ Withers, p.107; p.94

¹⁰⁷ *Narrow Ground*, [00:47]

¹⁰⁸ Ian McBride, ‘Ethnicity and Conflict: the Northern Ireland Troubles’, *Journal of British Studies*, 62.1 (2023), pp. 618-639, p.629 ; ‘Roots of Rave’, [12:00]; *Narrow Ground*, [08:35]

¹⁰⁹ Respondent 018, p.46; SouffleDeLogue, ‘Does anyone know what happened next for those who took part in this documentary?’, Reddit, (2021), <https://www.reddit.com/r/northernireland/comments/mqalfv/does_anyone_know_what_happened_next_for_those_who/> [accessed 15 November 2024]

¹¹⁰ yermaaaaa, Reddit (a); Respondent 215, p.46

¹¹¹ Gerry Moriarty, ‘Drugs war breaking the ceasefire?’, *The Irish Times*, 4 October 1995, p.13

opinions. One man explained how his 'good friendships' with members of the 'other' community had made him stop putting his 'flag out on the Twelfth'.¹¹² Another described his friendships as changing his 'perspective' by making him realise 'it's not all everybody's been saying', that the justification of divisions by community background appeared nonsensical after interacting with the 'other' for himself.¹¹³ This raver also described how friends who were 'in bands and...staunch loyalists' had left their marching bands and become 'mellow people' with 'Catholic girlfriends' after raving.¹¹⁴

This ability for rave to generate relationships that prompted participants to question community division and change certain behaviours threatened another fundamental 'logic' that perpetuated the Troubles – the normalisation of division as a 'fact of life'.

Stephen Milar and Sally Browne emphasise how paramilitarism, the most violent manifestation of intercommunity tension, is dependent on a 'naturalization and reification' of alienation between communities, and that paramilitaries 'operate and thrive from sectarian divide'.¹¹⁵ Milar explains how without this alienation paramilitaries' narratives of their necessity as 'defenders' of their communities from an unknown and feared 'other' would rapidly appear false.¹¹⁶ It was precisely this normalisation and fear that rave undermined, as youths described not caring about peoples' community background, and personally discovering that those from the 'other' community were similar to themselves and connections could be formed with them. Rave could make the justification of division appear hollow.

Moreover, the specific behaviour changes seen in these two ravers, the removal of a Unionist flag and the cessation of membership in a Loyalist marching band, have their own added layers of significance. Beginning with the removal of a flag: flags, murals, and kerbstones painted Red-White-Blue or with the Irish tricolour, are all considered objects that seek to demarcate an area as 'pure', only containing Protestants or Catholics.¹¹⁷ These signifiers of asserted identity make the space exclusionary to the 'other' community, normalise the sectarian categorisation of space by ingraining it in the landscape, and

¹¹² Respondent 205, p.44

¹¹³ Respondent 117, p.44

¹¹⁴ Ibid

¹¹⁵ Milar, p.12; Browne, p.216

¹¹⁶ Milar, p.12

¹¹⁷ McAlister, p.4

potentially motivate the violent defence of an area if it is felt the 'other's' presence has encroached on its purity.¹¹⁸ That raving prompted one participant to reject this system of spatial exclusivity and remove his own sectarian-spatial signifier is therefore highly significant.

Ceasing membership of a marching band has great significance too. Bell emphasises marching bands as *the* key accelerator of sectarian attitudes amongst Protestant youths in this period, finding band membership to have correlated with more extreme support for exclusive communities, segregated schooling, and Loyalist politics.¹¹⁹ The bands generated 'subcultural' groups of solely Protestant youths, reinforcing the normality of exclusionary identity defining friendship, whilst the activity of marching also served to 'parade' and 'rehearse' Loyalism, ingraining the ideology through practice rather than the complex process of radicalising youths through dogma.¹²⁰ Paul Moore has also emphasised how the bands' music and parades served to claim the audible and physical space of the streets, again asserting exclusive 'ownership' that could motivate violence.¹²¹ Therefore again, for rave to have stopped such problematic activity is significant in genuinely challenging sectarian behaviours that normalised division.

Overall then, rave did create opportunities to defy NI's sectarian divisions as the scene's myth suggests. Through the enjoyment of cross-community relationships, ravers rejected the normalisation of division and the concept of its necessity. For some ravers, these friendships held even deeper significance, creating lasting changes to their mentalities, in turn prompting disillusionment with the normality of sectarian division and causing the cessation of behaviours that reinforced exclusive identities as a result.

However, whilst there were some participants who experienced lasting changes to sectarian-supporting behaviours and opinions, many ravers' experiences of cross-community relationships did not enduringly challenge their belief in the normality of community division. Indeed, many participants appeared completely able to enjoy and engage with the

¹¹⁸ Bell, p.108; p.155; McAlister, p.4

¹¹⁹ Bell, p.156-167

¹²⁰ Ibid, p.156-167; p.20

¹²¹ Paul Moore, 'Sectarian Sound and Cultural Identity in Northern Ireland', in *The Auditory Cultural Reader*, ed. by Michael Bull and Les Black, (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 251-260, p.251-2

scene's cross-community dynamics, but equally able to revert to a problematic acceptance of division once returned to their normal environment.

These ravers' ability to simultaneously enjoy cross-community relationships *in* the rave, yet accept division *outside* the party depended on a process Silvia Rief terms 'distantiation'.¹²² In her analysis of the London rave scene, Rief discovered a tendency for participants to dismiss relationships they formed within parties once they left, dismissing them by emphasising drug-use as the *sole* cause of these relationships.¹²³ Rief found that this drug-based dismissal functioned to 'resolve discordances' that emerged as partygoers moved from a rave's play-reality back to normal life; ravers could be disorientated by how experiences within the rave (such as new friendships or alternative sexual relationships) had felt genuine and 'real' within the play-reality, but felt 'fake' and unsustainable outside.¹²⁴ However, these uncomfortable discordances that questioned a person's comfort in reality could simply be dismissed as prompted by, and dependent on, the pharmacologically altered mindset and play-reality of the rave – they became invalidated and thus no longer challenging for the individual.¹²⁵

NI's ravers exhibited this process entirely. Participants described relationships within raves as 'bullshit', 'shallow', and 'false'.¹²⁶ They gave absolute primacy to Ecstasy as the necessary catalyst for rave-relationships to form by emphasising the need for 'both parties' to be on the drug, or for relationships to be invalidated immediately as the drug left someone's system and suddenly a friend became 'the biggest cunt ever'.¹²⁷

This distantiation-indicative emphasis on drug-use worked to invalidate cross-community relationships in particular. Participants emphasised how, whilst rave was 'amazing' in its genuine ability to 'bridge the gap' between 'Catholics and Protestants' or even politically-minded 'Loyalists...and Republicans', these bonds were entirely dependent

¹²² Rief, p.110

¹²³ Ibid, p.111

¹²⁴ Ibid, p.115

¹²⁵ Ibid

¹²⁶ Respondent 116, p.39; Respondent 013, p.39; Respondent 201, p.40; Respondent 303, p.40

¹²⁷ Respondent 113, p.40; Respondent 308, p.4

on each community being ‘off their faces’, that it was ‘only drugs’ that brought ‘the two sides of the community together’.¹²⁸

Retrospective accounts similarly place a constant emphasis on the importance of Ecstasy:

‘Things changed for the better once the raves started and everyone was on pills!’.

‘In the days of good yokes, everyone was your best friend in there’.

‘Everyone just getting smashed and dancing their arses off’.

*‘whether u were orange or green, we were all friends thanks to the wonderful little tablet called ecstasy’.*¹²⁹

In these quotes, again it appears participants felt a need to stress Ecstasy as a necessary caveat that *explains* how the scene attained its cross-community character. Therefore, in their emphasis on the need to be ‘off your face’ to explore cross-community relationships, many Northern Irish ravers clearly embody distantiation.

As in Rief’s theory, this emphasis on drug-use as an explanatory caveat did allow many partygoers to dismiss the possibility for these connections to survive outside of the rave’s intoxicated parameters, in turn allowing themselves to reaccept division’s normality and necessity. Ravers emphasised how ‘the minute you’re out the door the old tribal thing takes over again’, how people ‘retreat back to their own camps after’, and how community background being unimportant ‘starts and stops at the entrance to the club’.¹³⁰ The spatial emphasis on the ‘doors’ here connects the importance of drugs to the spatial basis of raves as play-reality, collectively dismissing the possibility for cross-community solidarity to be sustained without the rave’s pharmaco-spatial catalysts.

Others became more obliquely accepting of division. Jonny followed his own emphasis on connections being dependent on ‘everyone [being] on drugs’ with an assertion that ‘once you start coming down and you get outside...youse’d be at each other’s throats’.¹³¹ Ravers from Lenadoon were similarly fatalistically confident that outside the rave, ‘a Catholic *can’t*

¹²⁸ Respondent 118, p.44; *The Shapes Between Us: NI Dance Music Culture on Screen*, (Second Chance Cinema, 2020), <<https://digitalfilmarchive.net/news/the-shapes-between-us-1172>> [accessed 12 December 2024], [11:40]; ‘Young Views’, *Waterside Voices*, Spring 1993, pp.29-30

¹²⁹ aBitConfused_NWO, Reddit (a); GraphicDesignMonkey, ‘Anyone remember Vico’s in Belfast?’, Reddit, (2017), <https://www.reddit.com/r/northernireland/comments/7erf1g/anyone_remember_vicos_in_belfast/> [accessed 15 November 2024]; Xephon-70; Azzaramad, Reddit (a)

¹³⁰ Respondent 015, p.44; Respondent 203, p.44; Respondent 108, p.44

¹³¹ *Narrow Ground*, [17:05]

walk into a Protestant area and start talking' without violence.¹³² These young people resolved the question that rave's cross-community relationships posed (whether intercommunity violence and division were truly certainties) by dismissing those connections and reassuring themselves that division was necessary for safety.

It must be stressed that this acceptance of a divided society, and dismissal of the possibility for cross-community relationships to become normal, was deeply problematic. This acceptance and dismissal normalised the 'naturalness and inevitability' of division, whilst pushing young people to see 'sectarian categorisation of residential space' as genuine 'reality'.¹³³ This division is what breeds alienation, that alienation making space for political and paramilitary actors to fill ignorance with fear and distrust that not only further proves the 'necessity' of division, but also creates anxious motivation to violently defend it.¹³⁴ That many ravers were able to readopt this accepting outlook, through distanciation, fundamentally undermines the rave myth's optimistic assessment of the scene creating lasting change to the attitudes of participants.

For some ravers, their reacceptance of division also enabled them to revert to even more problematic attitudes that very directly reinforced sectarianism. For example, Jonny from the majority-Protestant area Orangefield, was interviewed in the days surrounding the Eleventh and Twelfth Night celebrations. These celebrations are the apex of the Unionist political calendar and 'height' of 'concern with Protestant identity and difference', the Nights celebrating the victory of William of Orange at the Battle of the Boyne, 1690.¹³⁵ Despite their charged meanings, Jonny was as ambivalently accepting of the celebrations as he was of community division. Jonny described the parades as something young people 'just' did, they 'just [went] with the flow', whilst he personally enjoyed the parade and described it as the 'best one ever', particularly the parade's march 'past the Taigs' in celebration of how 'we won the Battle over the Taigs' (Taig being a slur for Catholics).¹³⁶ However, as aforementioned, these parades that Jonny accepted and enjoyed as part of his life were a

¹³² *Narrow Ground*, [51:55]

¹³³ Bell, p.155

¹³⁴ Milar, p.12

¹³⁵ Bell, p.138

¹³⁶ *Narrow Ground*, [36:30]; [39:50]; Action on Sectarianism, 'Sectarianism: Glossary of Terms', (2019), <<https://www.actiononsectarianism.info/library-main/research/sectarianism-glossary-of-terms>> [accessed 25 February 2025]

key mechanism reproducing Loyalist sentiment amongst youth, ingraining the ideology by 'rehearsing' a territorial and exclusionary identity.¹³⁷ Indeed, Jonny's belief in the Boyne as representing *his* community's victory 'over' the Catholic community, who he unanimously 'othered' in his usage of a slur, is indicative of his absorption of an exclusionary Protestant-Loyalist identity defined in opposition to a villainised Catholic population.¹³⁸ Moreover, the memorialisation of the battle subtly ingrains a 'memory' of violence as an acceptable and necessary mechanism to defend that identity.¹³⁹

Ravers from Lenadoon, a majority Catholic area, similarly expressed reverted sectarian attitudes outside of the rave. The ravers had seemingly lost their rave-developed solidarities and familiarity with people from the 'other' community. One raver first described a murder on the Falls Road as being committed by 'those cunts, the UVF, fucking-whatever-they-are', but then defaulted to a unanimous vilification of 'the Protestants' in totality.¹⁴⁰ This similar reversion to oppositional, unanimously vilifying, binary language undermines the lasting impact of rave's generation of intercommunity relationships. Where the rave had given people insights that those from the other community were 'just exactly the same as yourself', once returned to their insular communities alienated and sharply condemnatory understandings of the 'other' community reproductively proliferated.¹⁴¹

Therefore, these young people represent an inverted trajectory of the ravers who's relationships caused them to leave bands and take down flags. Where those young people's rave experiences pushed them not only to reject division but also behaviours deepening it, these ravers were contrastingly able to slide back toward sectarian-reproducing language and activities in spite of rave's supposedly lasting peacebuilding effect.

The duality of these trajectories may appear paradoxical: how could rave be so unanimously accounted as a space of peacebuilding cross-community interactions that created lasting challenges to sectarian attitudes for some, and yet so many ravers reaccepted division's normality once outside the rave whilst others reengaged in sectarian behaviours?

¹³⁷ Bell, p.55; Moore, p.251-2

¹³⁸ McAlister, p.4; McQuaid, p.25

¹³⁹ Ibid

¹⁴⁰ *Narrow Ground*, [51:10]

¹⁴¹ 'Roots of Rave', [26:30]; McQuaid, p.25; Milar, p.12

Whilst distantiation does in part explain the process by which ravers dismissed their cross-community experiences, a second layer of explanation is found in sectarianism's systemic, rather than interpersonal, basis. As a systemic problem, sectarianism will not be erased at scale by fostering 'mutual understanding' – positive relationships cannot overcome sectarianism's daily reification and normalisation on a universal scale.¹⁴² As such, the 'failure' of rave to universally generate lasting resistance to sectarianism becomes far more understandable.

In conclusion to this chapter, the mythic narrative of rave as a peaceful, positive space that enabled cross-community relationship exploration does accurately represent most experiences within the scene's boundaries. However, outside of these parameters the tendency of most ravers was to emphasise cross-community relationships as totally dependent on the rave's pharmaco-spatial characteristics, therefore invalidating them and nullifying the challenge the relationships posed to the normality of sectarian division. In turn, ravers were able to reaccept division, and for some this enabled a readoption of sectarian behaviours.

¹⁴² Bell, p.93; Milar, p.12

Conclusion:

NI's 1990s rave scene both represented and resisted the sectarianism and violence young people experienced in everyday life. This heterotopic, complex nature has been simplified in the scene's mythic narrative, but by retrieving these overwritten complexities, this thesis has constructed the first thorough historicisation of NI's rave scene.

Thousands of young people seized rave's offer of an escape from the primacy of violence and sectarianism as the governing forces of their lives. Raves, through their spatial, temporal, and pharmacological characteristics, granted many partygoers relief from their traumas and a novel chance to engage in conversations, dances, and friendships across community divisions. In doing so, these young people achieved not just a hedonistic release from the conflict's grasp, but also resisted two key logics that perpetuated the Troubles violence: the manipulation of trauma into grievance, and the normalisation of sectarian division. In this resistance, there was significant peacebuilding potential. Some participants rejected traumatic embitterment and moved away from paramilitary trajectories. For others, cross-community interactions revealed the hollow justifications behind sectarian division, offering them a glimpse of a life less defined by community identity. For some who sustained these relationships outside the party, they were pushed to reject sectarianism and cease their sectarian-supportive behaviours. In these regards, the rave scene could demonstrate its potential to fulfil its incredible and mythic narrative.

However, the scene's peacebuilding power was far from universal, and its escapism proved more imaginary than real. As heterotopias, raves paradoxically contained the violence and sectarian division that ravers sought to escape. This violent potential carried by raves generated such anxiety that some partygoers' engagement with the scene was governed by the Troubles' dangers: they only attended raves they estimated to be safe based on the party's demographic or the political 'season'. These well-founded anxieties afflicted even more ravers immediately after a party. Greeted by the cold night air, the rave's supposed insulation from danger rapidly faded. Ravers walked home in perpetual anxiety of random sectarian attacks, and rejected offers of continued cross-community interactions in fear that such activities might lead to their deaths. Ultimately, raves provided only a weak, brief reprieve from the Troubles' dangers. Likewise, the scene's challenge to sectarianism rarely breached the party's boundaries for most. Unlike the few partygoers who developed

lasting friendships and rejected division, the majority of ravers dismissed their cross-community relationships as solely generated by drug-use, and therefore implausible outside the rave. Through this dismissal, most ravers easily reaccepted division as a necessary reality. For some, this further enabled a reversion to problematic and sectarian-supportive language and behaviours. At scale, and from a wider temporal perspective, rave could not truly challenge the systemic issue of sectarianism.

In conclusion, whilst NI's rave scene offered extraordinary spaces for young people to resist trauma and sectarianism, this defiance was fragile and fleeting. Outside the party walls, the realities of life in NI – fear, violence, and division – rapidly reasserted themselves. As a result, the scene's promises of traumatic reprieve and peacebuilding rarely endured; rave's brief flash of a life beyond the Troubles' quickly faded into the darker rhythms of everyday life.

This thesis has challenged narratives that solely define NI through politics, violence, and division. By demonstrating rave's ephemeral but powerful moments of resistance, it is clear that quotidian experience of the conflict contained greater intricacies than these narratives suggest. This thesis' broader assessment of the scene has created new opportunities for more specific analyses that can further uncover these nuances. Historians should consider whether the scene's provision of cross-community relationship exploration also enabled experimentation with alternative sexual identities and relationships. Similarly, future research should explore deindustrialisation and unemployment as additional forces motivating ravers' escapism, adding a frequently overlooked social history context to the history of the Troubles. Memory scholars should also question why the scene's popular memory is imbued with such mythic positivity, seemingly in contradiction with NI's broadly divided memoryscape. To pursue these directions, it is imperative that future scholars undertake an oral history project to capture the voices of Northern Irish ravers in greater breadth. In anticipation of these directions, I hope this thesis marks the first step towards a rich historicisation of the scene's powerful voices and memories, and that future research continues to deepen historical understanding of the quotidian experiences of the 'Troubles generation'.

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