

## **Whiteness in Electronic Music: the Paradigmatic Case of Plague Raves**

Let us begin by acknowledging where and who we are. This is an academic conference and academic conferences cannot be genuine without recognising the constraining structure through which they operate. The university is by design an exclusive and colonial space. Let us look around. How many Black and brown people are in the room? How many will be heard? Is there anyone here who represents the struggle that electronic music has as its origin? Does what we see when we look around resemble our experience in spaces where the music is played? What are the walls around these spaces that seem so firm that they cannot be dismantled?

“Well it’s just industrial lies, hidden behind eyes, maximize, profitize, exploitation”

This line in Cybotron’s 1983 seminal work “Industrial Lies” has not lost its actuality. Instead, it has gradually been buried under whiteness. The same whiteness that reigns in the electronic music industry today. In this essay, we want to expose this whiteness, and make visible some of the violence it inflicts on Black and brown people. The plague raves which we have witnessed over the last year serve us as paradigmatic examples. This short essay is divided into two parts. In the first part, we draw on Cheryl Harris’ seminal paper “Whiteness as Property” to conceptualise whiteness. In the second part, we use this theoretical framework to not only define plague raves but also argue that they reinforce whiteness.

### **Whiteness as Property**

Harris begins her paper by telling us about her grandmother’s struggle in the Chicago of the 1930s. We learn how she was forced into self-denial and to present herself as a white woman to be employed in a retail store (Harris 1993: 1710). Archiving the experience of her grandmother, Harris writes:

“Each evening, my grandmother, tired and worn, retraced her steps home, laid aside her mask, and reentered herself. Day in and day out, she made herself invisible, then visible again, for a price too inconsequential to do more than barely sustain her family and at a cost too precious to conceive. She left the job some years later, finding the strain too much to bear. From time to time, as I later sat with her, she would recollect that period, and the cloud of some painful memory would pass across her face. Her voice would remain subdued, as if to contain the still remembered tension. On rare occasions, she would wince, recalling some particularly racist comment made in her presence because of her presumed, shared group affiliation. Whatever retort might have been called for had been suppressed long before it reached her lips, for the price of her family's well-being was her silence. Accepting the risk of self-annihilation was the only way to survive.” (Harris 1993: 1711).

When comparing the lived experience of Harris’ grandmother with the lived experience of Black and brown people in the electronic music industry today, we realise that not much has changed. Moreover, it also offers us some context of the place where techno was born some 30 years later. Harris’ grandmother was coerced to pass as white because whiteness gave her privileges and protection that she could not have accessed otherwise.

The history of whiteness in the US is one of racial subordination of Black people and Native Americans (Harris 1993: 1715). White people were both protected from becoming property and alone in their right to acquisition and possession as those were “defined to include only the cultural practices of whites. (Harris 1993: 1721)” White people could, for example, acquire and possess land because they identified themselves as the only people who were able to make effective use of it. Hence, whiteness became highly valuable and a form of property itself (Harris 1993: 1724).

Besides these theoretical associations, whiteness also shares some functions with property. It entails the right to use and enjoyment as well as the right to exclude others (Harris 1993: 1731). The latter is absolutely central as whiteness is first and foremost defined by “the exclusion of others deemed to be ‘not white.’” (Harris 1993: 1736) The right to use and enjoyment, on the other hand, materialises whenever [a white person] [takes] advantage of the privileges accorded [to] [them] simply by virtue of their whiteness” (Harris 1993: 1734).

## Plague Raves as a Paradigmatic Case of Whiteness

We have been documenting plague raves for almost a year now. But what exactly is a plague rave? Scientists have pointed out that raves are likely to be events with a high COVID-19 transmission rate because close contact and intense physical activity such as dancing result in increased respiration and thereby the creation of aerosols (businesssteshno 2020). The risk of transmission is even higher if the people who go there do not wear masks – following video footage, it seems this has been the case plenty of times. This by itself does not make them a plague rave, however. Another element that many plague raves share is that they are held in non-Western countries that are economically forced to have less strict COVID-19 rules. We have seen them most prominently in Mexico, India, and Tanzania. Yet, there have been plague raves in Italy, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States as well. The constitutive element of plague raves is rather something else: they are run by big promoters and DJs who take advantage of their whiteness.

The two weeks event by Amnesia Ibiza & Musiq Records in Zanzibar is the best example. There, whiteness played out in several ways. First, it made it possible to organise and attend the events. Second, it protected the organisers and attendees from the consequences of exposing the local population to the great risks of COVID-19 infection. Third, and most importantly, whiteness reinforced itself by making visible for everyone that Black and brown lives are de facto and de jure inferior or, in other words, that the law does not protect them from subordination. This became quite clear when in a prank call the DJ & promoter who was behind the Zanzibar event not only openly admitted that everyone involved was fully aware of the great risks for the local population but also revealed that in his opinion COVID-19 was a problem of the poor.

Following the ways whiteness plays out may help us understand why so many big promoters and DJs have been organising and playing one plague rave after another although there was no immediate financial need to do so. Plague raves are about something far more valuable than economic returns: they reinforce whiteness. Once looked at it this way, we may also understand (a) why the music press, booking agencies and clubs serve as gatekeepers of whiteness, (b) why labels “discover” new music and marketise it as white, and (c) why all of

them join forces to commodify black culture. In his seminal piece “A LETTER TO RA and the rest of the UK music press,” Rohshan Chauhan offers plenty of evidence of these dynamics (Chauhan 2020). If we want to truly honour the history of electronic music and build a space that is based on the values of equality and justice, then we must dismantle whiteness.

businesssteshno. ‘Plague Raves: What Were They Thinking’. Medium, 16th November 2020.

<https://businesssteshno.medium.com/plague-raves-what-where-they-thinking-124d1cf4473a>.

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