



Article

Techno's Sexual Counter-Space: Ecstasy and Electronics as Technologies of White Sex

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Abstract

This article aims to lift the veil on white sexuality by studying how young people ‘perform’ this within the Rotterdam techno scene. It relies on previous work that has highlighted that white sexuality is, like whiteness itself, rarely recognized, let alone referred to as white. This is also true of the sexuality practised by young people in the techno world. Our extensive observations and in-depth interviews conducted for this study identified that both ravers and cultural studies scholars construct an image of techno as a sexual ‘counter-space’ in which erotic agency can be experienced away from the confines of traditional hook-up sex. This space, they argue, is produced by the affective powers of ecstasy and electronics, which help young ravers to have a heightened sense of control over their sexual impulses, muting sexual desires that lead to hooking-up and, simultaneously, enabling them to feel ‘loved-up’ on themselves on the dance floor. We contend that, with discourses like these, ravers unintentionally reproduce white superiority in the ways they claim transcendence over their own sexual culture and corporeality.

Keywords

Ecstasy, sexuality, superiority, techno, transcendence, whiteness

Introduction

This article aims to lift the veil on white sexuality by studying young people’s sexual performances and experiences within the techno scene. It follows the idea that, like musical genres (Clay, 2003; Roy and Dowd, 2010; Schaap, 2015), party scenes are primary locations for the expression of intimate intersections between sexuality, race, and

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ethnicity (Böse, 2005; De Bruin, 2011; Measham and Hadfield, 2009; Talbot, 2004). We particularly want to understand how scholars' definitions and young people's practices of sexuality at techno parties are related to their whiteness. The answer to this question is complicated by both the unmarked status of whiteness (Anderson, 2003; Brekhus, 2015; Frankenberg, 1993; Lewis, 2003; Perry, 2002) and the way it is intertwined with the 'absent presence' of race in Europe. According to M'charek et al. (2014: 462), the latter continuously oscillates 'between reality and nonreality,' at once tabooed and actively removed from discourse, yet invariably showing its face in narrations of the 'Other' (Essed and Trienekens, 2008).

This Other is not rarely cast as a 'sexual Other' which is testament to sexuality's defining role in the formation of ethnic, racial (Butler, 2008; Krebbekx et al., 2017; Mepschen et al., 2010; Nagel, 2001, 2003; Said, 1978), and other status boundaries (Collins, 2004; Lawler, 2015; Skeggs, 2004). In the Netherlands, too, which is where this research is set, conceptions of 'good' and 'bad' sexual practices are at the heart of public debates on national citizenship, identity, and multiculturalism (Mepschen et al., 2010; Schalet, 2011; Verkaaik and Spronk, 2011). This reflects what Joane Nagel (2001, 2003) calls a sexualization of ethnicity and ethnicization of sexuality. Race and ethnicity are hard to disentangle in this context. The latter, while originally used as a replacement for the taboo subject of race, is an ever-changing concept that includes racial imagery in the construction of perceived cultural differences (Essed and Trienekens, 2008; M'charek et al., 2014; Wekker, 2016). It is then assumed that these differences yield to sexual differences between ethno-racial¹ minorities, and between these minorities and the Dutch white population, which is, for instance, reflected in public-health research and education reports about young people (Krebbekx et al., 2017; Van den Berg, 2013).

However, while the sexual practices of these ethno-racial minorities are treated as the effects of their ethnic and racial backgrounds, the opposite occurs with the sexuality of young whites (Krebbekx et al., 2017). This reflects a broader phenomenon where white sex is not associated with, or is in any way seen as, an expression of race and ethnicity. Like whiteness itself (Dyer, 1997), white sexuality is rarely recognized, let alone referred to, as white, which is both a consequence and privilege of whiteness as an unmarked identity (Anderson, 2003; Brekhus, 2015; Essed and Trienekens, 2008; Frankenberg, 1993; McDermott and Samson, 2005; Perry, 2001); and means that white sexual culture functions as a stand-in for sexual normalcy (Ward, 2015; Wekker, 2016). However, not all groups of white people are privileged with this unmarked sexual identity: while this may be true for white people who belong to the hegemonic group in Dutch society and have highly educated, middle-class, and urban backgrounds, white people from lower-class backgrounds and those who live in rural areas are notably associated with a sexual culture that is deemed to be 'less' than normal (Wouters, 2012). It is for this reason that the whiteness we aim to unveil in the sexual practices of young people in the techno scene cannot be understood without also taking into account the formation of these other class-related status markers.

The techno scene is a good context for this study of white sexuality 'as veiled', *precisely* because, in its current European guise, it is said to attract mostly white young people from the hegemonic group, that is, those who are also highly educated, urban, middle-class, and heterosexual (Malbon, 1999; Measham and Hadfield, 2009; Thornton,

1996).² Other characteristics of techno events are the factory-style assemblies and minimal decoration, which is also the central feature of the music, known as ‘techno’, which is defined as an electronic and repetitive sound that relies on an intense bass and a gradually progressing beat (Reynolds, 1999; Ter Bogt et al., 2002). Most public dancing occurs facing a DJ booth, and is performed by young people with a high general level of fitness, which they perform in their dancing, but also their dress, which typically consists of tight jeans, black crop-tops, and sneakers for female ‘ravers’ (as techno crowds are commonly called), and relatively close-fitting pants, oversized t-shirts, caps, and sneakers for their male counterparts. However, the most striking – or, at least, most cited – aspect of techno is the high levels of MDMA and ecstasy that are consumed at such parties (Kavanaugh and Anderson, 2008).³

While the latter has prompted public-health scholars to connect the techno scene to ‘risky’ sexual practices (for a discussion of this literature, see Anderson and Kavanaugh, 2007), a much larger body of work from the field of cultural studies fosters a positive image of the scene as a site of sexual experimentation. Scholars like Angela McRobbie (1993) have positioned techno as a type of ‘counter-space’ (Williams, 2008), a ‘festal interzone’ or ‘experimental theatre of change’ (O’Grady, 2012; St John, 2003), because of elements in techno that ostensibly break with traditional gender norms and ‘hook-up’ sex. Pini (1997: 154), meanwhile, has argued that techno ‘represents an undoing of the traditional cultural associations between dancing, drugged, “dressed-up” woman and sexual invitation, and as such opens up a new space for the exploration of new forms of identity and pleasure’. Pointing again to the influence of synthetic drug use, these scholars often go so far as to contend that the entire scene is marked by a culture of sexual innocence and avoidance (see, also, Buckland, 2002; McRobbie, 1994; Redhead, 1993; Reynolds, 1999). As McRobbie has argued (1993: 25): ‘The culture is one of childhood, of a pre-sexual stage, pre-oedipal stage.’

In this article, we look at the intersections between this rhetoric of techno as a sexual counter-space and its whiteness. The account that follows is based on six months of participatory observations and 15 in-depth qualitative interviews with young people in the techno scene of Rotterdam, the second largest city of the Netherlands. Our choice of Rotterdam adds another geographical area to the techno literature, which has thus far mainly focused on the Berlin, Paris and Chicago scenes (see, for instance, Garcia, 2011). Rotterdam has the largest share of ethno-racial minority groups in the Netherlands – at present, 52% of its population, mainly consisting of those with Surinamese, Antillean, Turkish and Moroccan origins. This is also reflected in its nightlife, which, on the one hand, is more ethno-racially diverse than other Dutch cities, but, on the other hand, also more spatially segmented (Schwanen et al., 2012). Moreover, like other popular European cities, Rotterdam hosts a predominantly white, middle-class, and heterosexual techno scene.

Studying techno, sexuality and whiteness in Rotterdam

The fieldwork for this study was coordinated by the first author and conducted by the second. Three student assistants added further observations and conducted in-depth interviews. The techno parties observed were selected on the basis of their apparently

accessible character, with the events hosted by popular clubs in Rotterdam that advertised them as open to anyone above the age of 18 who was willing to pay an entrance fee of approximately 10 euros. The fieldwork was conducted over a period of about six months, starting in early 2017 and lasting well into the summer. Observations were conducted at six techno parties using an observation protocol with a significant autoethnographic component (comparable to Ellis, 2004; Ellis and Bochner, 2006; Reger, 2015). Handwritten memos documented how the ethnographer prepared for the techno parties, what the party spaces looked like, what music was played, how the crowds behaved, and notable events. The memos were written at various times during the parties and in diverse club spaces. This guided an extensive emic description of developments at each party (written from the perspective of the ‘researcher as raver’). The second author attended all of the parties with other young people known to her (sometimes closely, at other times superficially).

In the same period, a total of 15 in-depth interviews were conducted with young ravers between the ages of 18 and 25, who were recruited using a snowballing technique that started with close friends and colleagues and proceeded from there (see Appendix I). Most of these respondents were white, but we also included four non-white respondents because, for one, they regularly attend and enjoy techno parties, showing that the scene is not entirely homogeneous, and also because we recognize that whiteness is a highly contextual privilege of not having to think about, let alone articulate, one’s race, ethnicity, and sexuality (Dyer, 1997; Perry, 2001). On the one hand, this means that those who are not white are more likely to identify these factors as part of the techno scene; on the other, we also recognize that there are context-dependent ‘gradations of whiteness’ in which some non-whites (e.g. our Afghan and Surinamese respondents) as well as some whites (e.g. those with migrant, non-heterosexual and lower-class backgrounds) may be regarded as more or less white, depending on the circumstances in which this identification takes place (Dyer, 1997; Frankenberg, 1993; Hartigan, 2013; McDermott, 2006; Shirley, 2010; Wray, 2006).

This links back to the other status markers discussed in the Introduction: it is not just whiteness, but also the way it is formed and combined with other signs of hegemony relating to gender, class, education and sexuality, that keeps white sexuality under wraps within certain social settings (cf. Ward, 2015). Although we tried to recruit a diverse group of respondents with regards to these other status markers as well, including both female and male, heterosexual and non-heterosexual ravers, our sample is rather uniform with respect to level of education, as only two respondents had not completed (or were not on the way to completing) higher education in the Dutch system. This is a significant detail because the Netherlands is not widely regarded as a class society (like, for instance, the UK), but prefers to think of itself as post-class (Van Eijk, 2012; Weenink, 2005; Wouters, 1990). The Dutch are in fact as uneasy about thinking and talking about class as they are about race, but this does not mean that Dutch society *is* actually post-class (just as it is not post-race), but status hierarchies and social divisions in this country are highly anchored in differences in educational attainment, which again presupposes differences in ‘culture’ and taste (Van der Waal et al., 2007; Van Eijk, 2012). The fact that our respondents are overwhelmingly higher educated is, however, in keeping with what is known about the techno scene in the Netherlands and other continental European countries, with ravers predominantly heralding from middle-class backgrounds (Garcia, 2014).

The interviews we conducted with our young ravers were semi-structured. General questions about the role of sexuality at techno parties guided the dialogue, but there was sufficient space for the respondents to add their own topics (Holstein and Gubrium, 2004). We asked about their experiences at techno parties, including why they enjoy them and if, how and when they become sexual. Each interview started with the questions ‘Can you tell me about the sort of parties you usually attend?’ and ‘How would you describe the atmosphere at these parties?’ The questioning then slowly moved toward: ‘In your experience, is sexuality also a part of these parties? And how so?’ The answers to these questions formed the basis for a more in-depth discussion of why a respondent did or did not associate techno with certain performances of sexuality. The interview data were transcribed and stored in a Word file in which we anonymized the participants’ names.

An inductive analysis with two phases was conducted to identify how young people practise and experience sexuality at techno parties, and we convened several times to discuss our main interpretations of the data. Consistent with grounded-theory principles (see Bryant and Charmaz, 2007; Charmaz, 2014; Corbin and Strauss, 2008), the first phase comprised a bottom-up comparative approach, whereby we read through the observations and interviews multiple times, comparing fragments and looking for recurring themes, concepts and categories, and variations and exceptions. All of our findings were then coded into a Data Matrix table. In the second phase, we connected these themes, concepts, categories, variations, and exceptions to the established literature on young people, techno, sexuality, and whiteness. We then re-read the data with new theoretical insights in mind, employing a top-down approach to achieve saturation of the analysis.

In the first part of what follows, we describe the overarching discourse that young ravers and scholars use to portray sexuality in the techno scene. This discourse attributes the forms of sexuality practised and experienced at techno events to ‘technologies of the self’, that is, the scene’s reliance on ecstasy and electronics (by which we mean techno music). In the second part, we further unpack this discourse in terms of its whiteness.

Creating a sexual counter-space: Ecstasy as technology of the sexual self

Our analysis broadly reveals that young ravers identify the techno party as a kind of ‘counter-space’ (cf. Williams, 2008), in which erotic agency can be experienced away from the confines of traditional hook-up sex. As we will see throughout the descriptions that follow, the sexual practices that take place within this space are described by both ravers and scholars as very ‘different’ from other party scenes (more fluid, autoerotic and experimental), and they are above all attributed to the affective workings of ecstasy. ‘It’s activated by the drugs,’ Kiki, for instance, argued, ‘because when you use ecstasy you think everything’s sweet and nice, also the intimacy,’ added Job.

Although the ravers in our study developed several discourses on the affective powers of ecstasy, their main argument was that, through this drug, techno promises a temporary release from traditional (hetero-normative) courtship rituals, expectations, and gender performances. ‘It [ecstasy] makes you such a sweet person’, said Richard. ‘I’ve seen the toughest of men hugging and giving each other massages in the smoking-room. That’s

beautiful to see.’ All of the young female ravers we spoke to described this promise as one of the most pleasurable aspects of techno parties:

Yes, and I’ve got this idea that when I normally go clubbing at a regular R&B night or something like that . . . that there’s more tension between men and women and that there are a lot of guys who are really looking for girls, and then I also get stopped a lot and that’s immediately flirtatious. And at a techno party everyone’s more relaxed and you do get stopped sometimes, but then I don’t immediately get the idea that someone actually wants something from me. (Laura)

This promise of a release from courtship also features heavily in the literature on the techno scene, with many contending that this has actually surpassed the notion that clubbing is about pick-up (Anderson and Kavanaugh, 2007; Garcia, 2011; Jackson, 2004; Malbon, 1998, 1999; McRobbie, 1993; Pini, 1997; Richard and Kruger, 1998). Techno parties, they argue, are one of the few places where open physical pleasure can be exercised without the constraining influence of traditional and patriarchal conceptions of sexuality (Pini, 1997, 2001; Richard and Kruger, 1998), which strongly matches the discourse promoted by ravers themselves. Compare, for instance, what our respondents Laura and Richard said in the foregoing extracts to Angela McRobbie’s statement that, at techno parties:

[W]orking class boys⁴ lose their ‘aggro’ and become ‘new men’ not through the critique of masculinity . . . but through the use of ecstasy. They undergo a conversion to the soft, the malleable, and the sociable rather than the anti-social. (McRobbie, 1993: 25)⁵

Our ravers often contrasted techno events with other club scenes where alcohol, not ecstasy, is effectively the drug of choice (see, also, Hinchliff, 2001; Malbon, 1999; Pini, 2001). Earlier, Laura named the multi-ethnic R&B scene, but also other predominantly white scenes like bars and fraternity parties, are named as being more explicitly about sex, because of the alcohol consumed:

And when I’m someplace else, I often think men, especially when they’ve been drinking, then I often find that annoying, because you notice from the first moment that that person really wants something from you. (Joan)

Two young men who accompanied Anouk to various techno parties, in their turn, confided that they are more likely to pick up girls in bar-like settings (observation memos 5/5/2017, 20/5/2017), while some of our female ravers also confessed that drinking indeed makes them more inclined to ‘hook-up’. Like ecstasy, then, alcohol is identified by these ravers as producing certain sexual desires, practices, and experiences, but unlike ecstasy, these desires, practices, and experiences are oriented toward hooking-up.

Ravers and scholars, as such, both construct a theory where ecstasy and its main component (MDMA) work as powerful ‘technologies of the sexual self’ in the techno scene (cf. DeNora, 1997; Van Bohemen et al., 2018), creating what Pini (2001: 165) called ‘a mind/body/technology assemblage’, in which ecstasy moves emotional, cognitive and physical states, establishing erotic agency and otherwise impossible sexual pleasures, while at the same time also muting certain sexual desires. This latter aspect is very

common, according to our interviewees. As Fela said: 'Because when you use drugs, you don't necessarily want to become horny or something.' Meanwhile, in their 2002 research, Ter Bogt and colleagues stated: 'It [MDMA] makes people feel cuddly more than it evokes sexual feelings', and so 'MDMA may be a love drug, but it is not experienced as an aphrodisiac' (2002: 167).

In this context, it was notable that the electronic music ('techno') was mentioned much less frequently by our ravers, although for some it nevertheless plays a similar role to ecstasy: it transforms, often by muting sexual desire. Paige, for example, argued that it is 'because of the music *and* the drugs that [she doesn't] really want to kiss [other ravers]' at techno parties.

This notion of ecstasy and electronics as 'technologies of the sexual self' goes back to Foucault and his later work (as outlined in his *History of Sexuality*, 1990). In this, he develops an interest in 'technologies of the self', by which he means technologies of individual self-formation, where the individual is acting upon or performing certain 'techniques upon itself' (in Foucault's original terms, see Burkitt, 2002) in order to create and refine the self. Foucault (1988: 18) saw these technologies as permitting individuals to perform transformations on their bodies and minds 'to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection.' In our case, this relates directly to sexuality. The word 'permitting' is significant here, as is the active phrasing of the individual performing transformations on the self. This is because it is not only the properties of the technologies that produce these sexual transformations, but also the individual interacting with these properties in a certain way to create a particular type of sexual experience.

From research on intoxication we know that different people react differently to the same drugs, also depending on the social settings they find themselves in (Becker, 1967; Gomart and Hennion, 1999; MacAndrew and Edgerton, 1969; Saldanha, 2007). This is likewise the case for music (DeNora, 1997; Van Bohemen et al., 2018). Affective change happens in the interaction between the properties of these technologies and the ways they are encountered. This does not occur automatically, but requires people to actively engage with, and give meaning to, a particular technology in a particular setting, where there are also particular mores, customs, and subcultural modes of doing and being that come into play (DeNora, 2003; Saldanha, 2007; Van Bohemen et al., 2018).

Yet, these social and cultural antecedents of ecstasy and electronics as 'technologies of the sexual self' were seriously downplayed by the young ravers in our study. This was especially the case for ecstasy, with all of our respondents presenting a very bio-medical picture, with the drug unilaterally *causing* sexual transformations; they discussed it as 'effects' rather than 'affects'. It is all the properties of the drugs that move them, they argued.

The missing discourse of whiteness

In the leading discourse discussed above, the influences of race and ethnicity and other social-status markers on the creation of techno's sexual counter-space almost completely receded from view. They did, however, reappear in conversations about people who do not follow the rules (cf. M'charek et al., 2014), as when Richard stated that:

For a while, there was a group of older black guys and I have the feeling they were feeding young girls with pills so they could take them home. That's really sick . . . But it's also really the exception.

Something similar arose in one of our observation memos. In an emic description of a night out in one of Rotterdam's most popular techno venues, Anouk discussed how she and her friend Joan were dancing, when a young man approached them in a way that they both deemed unpleasant:

The boy is somewhat older, from an Asian background, and wears a blue shirt. I can't see from the look on his face if he's on drugs, but he's being very touchy-feely and friendly. When we continue dancing, he comes in-between Joan and me and puts an arm around each of us . . . We both walk away and decide to dance a bit further up on the floor.

The story continues when Anouk comes back after smoking outside the club:

When I suddenly feel two hands on my shoulders, I look behind me and there's the boy in the blue shirt. I look at him in an unfriendly way as he asks: 'Do you mind if I massage you?' I answer: 'No I won't enjoy that' . . . I'm beginning to think the boy isn't on drugs, but is trying to act as if he is, in response to the people that are. He's too persistent in his advances for someone on ecstasy . . . But he knows very well that a massage is very pleasant for someone on ecstasy. I walk down the stairs where Joan is waiting for me. We agree that he's an exceptional type at a techno party.

In this description of events, not only is the boy's Asian appearance one of the first things mentioned, but Anouk also follows the narrative of ecstasy's production of techno's sexual counter-space, concluding that the youth is probably not on ecstasy because he persevered with his predatory sexual advances.⁶

Belal, a non-white bartender at a popular techno club, however, explained that this image of techno as a bio-medically formed sexual counter-space is not only actively produced and maintained by ravers, but also by the clubs, which use ethnic profiling to 'filter the public' (something that has also been highlighted by Böse, 2005; De Bruin, 2011; Measham and Hadfield, 2009; Talbot, 2004). He defended this policy, arguing that:

If you put a certain public together, you just know there's a chance you're going to get brawls. We sometimes have Antillean parties. Yes, and then if there's a group of preppy boys in white shirts at our door, we just tell them it's not a party for them. Perhaps it sounds bad, and you [should] treat everyone like they're all the same, but certain groups or types just aren't capable of partying together . . . Perhaps it's discriminating, but it's also a hard reality.

Such explicit talk of race and ethnicity and the role they play in the production of these party spaces was, however, an exception in our data, concealing the fact that techno's sexual counter-space is in fact a white sexual space. This became painfully clear when Paige, a black woman, talked about an otherwise inconspicuous aspect of her appearance, and then asked us to omit this from the interview transcript because she felt it would make her easy to recognize, since very few black women attend techno parties in Rotterdam.⁷

However, it is not very surprising that these were the only times race and ethnicity were explicitly mentioned. This is because whiteness is so synonymous with dominance, and a well-established characteristic of it, that it hides itself, including from those who embody it. This is especially the case here, where it is combined with other hegemonic status-markers relating to class, education, and sexual and regional identities (Brekhus, 2015; Frankenberg, 1993; Perry, 2001). According to Pamela Perry (2001: 59), this is how white people unintentionally signal superiority, as it evokes the suggestion that they are either the norm ‘and “simply human” (therefore, the standard to which others should strive) or beyond culture or “postcultural” (therefore, developmentally advanced)’.

What we extrapolate from this and other (critical) studies of whiteness is that transcendence is its most central feature, by which we mean that white people continuously try to, and manage to ‘overcome’, their ethnicity, history, culture, and racial body, in the end transcending the concept of whiteness as a whole (Dyer, 1997; Essed and Trienekens, 2008; Frankenberg, 1993, 2001; McIntosh, 1997; Perry, 2001). As Arun Saldanha (2007) argues in relation to the whiteness of the Goa trance scene in Anjuna, India (which shares many similarities with techno):

whiteness . . . posits itself as a transcendent category. Whites simultaneously refuse to think of themselves as raced or colored (they are above race) *and* continually reinvent themselves, escape their own corporeality (they are beyond race). (Saldanha, 2007: 196, original italics)

In his famous work *White* (1997), Richard Dyer argues that one way in which white people unwittingly do this is by not categorizing themselves in terms of race and ethnicity, but in relation to other – much more complex – differences. They prefer to see themselves as unique and creative individuals, evading stereotypes (Traber, 2007). In Dyer’s words (1997: 12): ‘White people in their whiteness . . . are imagined as individual and/or endlessly diverse, complex and changing.’ This, too, is a recurring feature of techno’s counter-space, which our Rotterdam ravers stressed consists of a colourful array of people who dare to be different. As Job argued: ‘But that’s what makes it so fun. The diversity of people . . . Even if you walked there wearing only your bra, nobody would look at you and think it’s strange.’

More importantly for our purposes, however, is the fact that this transcendence of the ethno-racial body also materializes in the way that techno youth ‘do’ sexuality. Although the ravers we interviewed did not show any signs of intentionally wanting to reproduce white superiority, their accounts of sexuality in the techno scene are filled with rhetoric about sexual transcendence that fits this profile. Transcendence here also takes the form of ‘overcoming’, of going ‘beyond’ traditional hook-up sex, hetero norms and gender roles (as we have shown in the previous section), eventually testing the limits of the sexual body, that is, *the sexual self*, itself (as we will explain shortly).

Ecstasy and electronic dance music as ‘technologies of the sexual self’ have a central role in accomplishing this overcoming of the ethno-racial self in sexuality, and so in realizing white sexuality in the techno context. Consequently, we argue that these ‘technologies of the sexual self’ function on ‘an interactive plane’ (DeNora, 2003) with (and should be regarded as) ‘technologies of the ethno-racial self’.

Ecstasy as sexual transcendence

According to Dyer, the ‘spirit’ of hegemonic whiteness lies in its claim of overcoming its own body, which he argues has been made inferior to the mind in Christianity and has, ever since, needed to be constrained, meaning that sexuality must also be reined in. In Dyer’s words (1997: 24):

What makes whites different, and at times uneasily locatable in terms of race, is their embodiment, their closeness to the pure spirit that was made flesh in Jesus, their spirit of mastery over their and other bodies, in short their potential to transcend their raced bodies.

As sexuality is conceived as being of the body, this too becomes something that needs to be overcome. Overt expressions of sexuality and desire are not something white people do, but instead belong to the unruly bodies of Others (Said, 1978; Wekker, 2016). This is why whiteness has historically had an anxious relationship with (hetero)sexuality (Stokes, 2001). As Dyer (1997: 26) argues, whites need hetero sex to survive and to reproduce whiteness, but ‘having sex, and sexual desire, are not very white’.

It is clear from previous sections of this article, in which we briefly addressed some ravers’ views about muting sexual desire through ecstasy and electronic dance music, that this overcoming of sex and sexual desire is central to techno’s sexual counter-space. In doing so, these young ravers articulate sexual transcendence in the form of shutting down gratification achieved from hooking-up. It is in this sense that scholars also talk about (and often overstate) techno as being de-sexualized (Malbon, 1999). This does not, however, mean that sexuality is avoided, or even abandoned, in techno, as McRobbie (1993) once claimed. ‘At techno you see a lot of touchy-feeliness’, said Belal, ‘with people [who] are constantly hugging and fondling’, which he and other ravers again related to the scene’s reliance on ecstasy. This is because ecstasy paves the way to experiencing sensory pleasures that cannot otherwise be felt:

I really enjoy hugging boys and caressing and holding [on ecstasy] . . . What’s also really nice is holding hands . . . also girls with girls. Everyone’s holding hands, because your hands are much more sensitive and at that moment, when it all comes together, it just feels a lot more pleasant. (Sacha)

What Sacha explained is in line with Pini’s (2001) study of female ravers, which also demonstrates that young people in the techno scene experience various modes of sexuality after consuming ecstasy, although these are often hard to define. They are perceived as ‘ecstatic feelings’ and autoerotic sensations that, it could be argued, change sexuality from something (purely) ‘physical’ into something of a ‘spiritual’ experience.

Combining ecstasy with electronic music enabled the young people in our study to feel ‘loved-up’ on themselves on the dance floor, where they experienced sensory pleasures that their bodies are not normally capable of perceiving, as Kiki explained:

You’re really happy and euphoric. A friend then also says ‘I’m becoming horny because of myself’. Like ‘I’m dancing and becoming aroused from myself’. It’s activated by the drugs, so that people become more physical⁸ or intimate, like giving a small kiss on your cheek. I’ve

never had it myself, but I've seen it. People become really *mellow*,⁹ touchy-feely. I have the idea that, with techno, people are more extreme in expressing this, because everyone's on that sexual level in terms of euphoria. (Kiki)

Becoming 'loved-up' celebrates the experience of sexuality in a highly individualized form, yet Kiki's comments also signify a holistic connection with other people at the techno party who share in a similar state of sexual consciousness. This culminates in an intense, and intensely inter-subjective, experience of the sexual self, which is kept safe and intra-subjective because of the way it is bound to the dance space in the club. Sexuality at techno parties is not about going home with someone, as our interviewees repeatedly stressed:

Iris: Yes, and the intention of 75 percent of the physical contact is more like 'Oh you look beautiful, you feel nice'. It's sort of more experimental than like 'Hey I'm going to drag you home with me.'

Fela: But I don't have much experience with going home with someone after this kind of party. Actually, I don't have any experience with that, except for after-parties, and those are also not about sex. Just kissing, falling asleep, waking up the next day. Just lying in bed feeling drowsy. But no real sex, that's more when you go to a bar.

Anouk: So, flirting is part of it. . .

Fela: Yes, but it's not a stepping-stone toward sex or going to bed with someone, it's none of that. Still it's fun. Sometimes I'm just standing with a *chick* all night, kissing and dancing for a bit. But that's just a quite pleasant feeling. But it's never the prerequisite for sex.

Anouk: So, the intention is not. . .

Fela: . . . not to go to bed with each other. Especially when I've done drugs, I'm also just rubbish in bed. You know, there's not so much use in that.

Sacha also talked about this:

I've never had sex after I've done drugs . . . I've only kissed and hugged and stroked someone's arm, but no more. But I also have to say that that's not something I'd enjoy. The moment I get home from this type of party, I'm just completely broken. Physically. You've just been dancing all night long, you've asked a great deal of your body, so the moment I lie in bed, I'm just completely, physically wrecked. In most cases I wouldn't be able to handle a boy being next to me that I have to pay attention to.

What these excerpts reveal is that ecstasy, according to our ravers, not only makes otherwise inaccessible sexual configurations and pleasures possible (with kissing, hugging and fondling becoming much more enjoyable), but also affects the body in such a way that gratification from intercourse is muted.

A young raver can transcend their body by testing its limitations: they dance all night, perceive sensations not normally attainable, dampen their libido and, in the end, experience sexual transformations that seem to do away with the sexual self itself. Sacha's case

is an example: with the help of ecstasy and electronics she has managed to destroy her sexual body, which is wrecked to the extent that it can no longer have sex. On the one hand, this may appear to be a narrative of ravers losing control over their bodies, which would stand in stark contrast to what we know about white sexuality, which is all about exercising control – over the body, over the sexual self and over sexual others (e.g. Finch, 1993; Nagel, 2001, 2003; Said, 1978; Wekker, 2016). Yet this is not what our ravers seem to mean, because, on the other hand, they juxtapose this narrative of wrecking the sexual body with one of ecstasy allowing them to experience control over their sexual impulses, giving them mastery over the flesh.

This was particularly the case among the female ravers in our study, who argued that ecstasy makes them more aware of what they want and more vocal about this to the men in their presence. Again, this overwhelmingly relies on a comparison they made with other instances where they have drunk alcohol, which they said lowers their inhibitions:

But I have this idea that when you've taken pills that . . . you can react relatively easily to something you don't like, then you just shrug and walk off, and if you do like it you stick around . . . So, it's like your boundaries are much clearer. If you've been drinking, everything starts to become a little vague . . . Your standards become lower. (Iris)

Something similar is experienced by Laura, who said that alcohol makes her more self-confident, but also causes her do things she later regrets or does not remember: 'With drugs that's also true, but with drugs your senses are much more accurate.'

It seems from the ravers' accounts that ecstasy and electronics do not lead to sex in the sense of going to bed with someone. Instead, they help them to improve their sexual bodies by providing cognitive control over their inhibitions, dampening their libido, but also paving the way to autoerotic pleasures the body does not normally permit. As we have argued throughout this section, all these practices reiterate typically hegemonic white forms of sexuality and moral superiority.

Discussion: Ecstasy as technology of whiteness

Embodying the sexual 'counter' image in the way these young ravers do means having moral superiority over other social groups who are not 'counter' and who have not (yet) reinvented themselves in relation to their sexuality such as those who are still 'doing it' according to traditional hetero norms and gender roles, and for whom hooking-up is the ultimate objective. This is precisely what one of our respondents, Benji, said about rural parties:

For instance, a while back, I went . . . to *Naaldwijk*, the village I'm from, we have [a] party week. That's in summer a whole week of parties and the like. I can remember well that I was there and that . . . everyone just, well I don't want to describe it as banal, but everyone there is more about drinking beer and, yes, scoring girls, or if it's girls, scoring boys. And there's not much else to it . . . Like, you can only have fun with everyone if you also behave masculine or as a woman, feminine, and you're just all the same, you see?

Benji refers here to lower status whites who have not yet ‘caught on’ to the ‘counter’ status, in which practising sexuality is all about unique individuals transcending traditional hetero norms, gender roles, and hook-up sex. Such allegations are, however, also levelled at ethno-racial minorities in the Netherlands: while race (as well as class) is a taboo subject in the country, public discourse has replaced it with moral contentions about cultural difference, which often takes the form of sexual difference (Butler, 2008; Krebbekx et al., 2017; Mepschen et al., 2010; Nagel, 2001, 2003; Verkaaik and Spronk, 2011). Ethno-racial minorities, as well as lower-status whites, are cast here as less advanced in terms of their development than higher-status whites, because they do not exhibit the same levels of sexual inventiveness and control (Essed and Trienekens, 2008; Perry, 2001; Said, 1978; Wekker, 2016). In other words, they are either too unconfined in practising their sexuality (an allegation that is often made toward black minorities and lower-status whites in the Netherlands) or too prudish (a claim that is commonly expressed about Islamic youth).

The fact that the sexual behaviours of these groups are imagined in the public discourse as moral trespassing (of the Dutch so-called ‘liberal’ identity) shows that being ‘counter’ is not normally something non-whites or lower-status whites can get away with, unlike the young white ravers in our study. Aside from a handful of public health studies that express reservations about the techno scene’s reliance on ecstasy (see Anderson and Kavanaugh, 2007), the public and scholarly response to techno tends to emphasize the positive, praising its potential for sexual transcendence (e.g. Anderson and Kavanaugh, 2007; Garcia, 2011; Jackson, 2004; Malbon, 1998, 1999; McRobbie, 1993; Pini, 1997; Richard and Kruger, 1998), which our study shows has both a *cultural* (using ecstasy and electronics to overcome traditional sexual norms and practices) and a *corporeal* component (using ecstasy and electronics to overcome the sexual body). We must recognize, however, that young white people’s embodiment of this sexual ‘counter’ image can also produce such moral superiority precisely because of the hegemonic position this group already holds in society.

Indeed, it is because young ravers are predominantly white, heterosexual, and have highly educated, middle-class and urban backgrounds, that they are in the position to define the sexual practices (hugging, kissing, flirting, fondling) that take place at techno parties as not really sexual and more experimental (cf. Ward, 2015). It is also because they are white, heterosexual, highly educated, urban, and middle-class that they can position ecstasy and electronics as influencing sexuality in a positive way, while at the same time arguing that alcohol and other musical (bar or club) settings affect it in a negative way. Finally, it is because they are white, heterosexual, highly educated, urban, and middle class that they are in a position to talk about this without referencing their racial, ethnic or status background, instead imagining themselves and their peers as endlessly complex and diverse. Hegemonic whiteness is, in this case, both a privilege and mask of privilege; it hides the fact that these young white people are actually allowed to be different – can get away with being ‘counter’ – precisely because they are the most privileged group in society (Dyer, 1997; Traber, 2007).

As such, while previous research has foregrounded techno’s technological transformations in creating a sexual counter-space, our study shows that these technologies cannot be disentangled from the ethno-racial context in which they do their affective work.

Ecstasy and electronics are not just technologies of the sexual self, but of the ethno-racial self as well. They are technologies of white sex.

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Notes

1. At times, we use the combined term ‘ethno-racial’ to account for the way race and ethnicity are intertwined in Dutch public discourse (following Essed, 1996).
2. This, while techno was once introduced in 1980s Detroit by black gay DJs (Garcia, 2014; Sicko, 2010; Ter Bogt et al., 2002; Thornton, 1996).
3. Often, people refer to techno parties with the more encompassing term ‘raves’, which means parties that rely on electronic dance music and involve the consumption of high levels of ecstasy by so-called ‘ravers’.
4. While McRobbie identifies them as ‘working class’ (which was the dominant group attending UK raves in the 1970s and 1980s), ravers in the Netherlands, other continental European countries, and the USA today predominantly come from middle-class backgrounds (Garcia, 2014).
5. It should be noted that in *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009) McRobbie revised her view, and is now overtly critical and pessimistic about the potential of popular culture and dance to produce positive change in gender dynamics.
6. Of course, one could ask how surprising it is that the boy’s Asian appearance is one of the first things mentioned, given that this observation occurred in the context of a project about sexuality intersecting with race and ethnicity. Nevertheless, explicit statements about ethno-racial appearances in this and other observations are few in number and never occur in the case of white Dutch ravers. Indeed, at the same party, there were also other boys who approached Anouk and her friend Joan, but in ways that the women did not deem to be predatory. The ethno-racial characteristics of these boys are not mentioned, and so one would have to assume (rightly) that they were white.
7. We later asked Paige for permission to use this description of events, which she gave.
8. Kiki used the Dutch word ‘kuffeliger’, which literally translated means ‘more prone to hugging’.
9. We use italics to quote words that were originally spoken in English.

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Appendix I

Name	M/F	Age	Ethno-racial background	Education (highest level completed)	Sexual orientation	Occupation
Lois	F	23	Dutch (white)	Pre-university	Heterosexual	Waitress at a coffee bar
Belal	M	24	Afghan (non-white)	Higher general secondary	Heterosexual	Bartender at a popular techno club
Benji	M	19	Dutch (white)	Pre-university	Homosexual	Student assistant at university
Dean	M	25	Dutch (white)	Higher vocational/professional	Homosexual	Primary school teacher
Fela	M	22	Dutch (white)	Pre-university	Heterosexual	Student assistant
Iris	F	23	Dutch (white)	University Bachelor	Heterosexual	Policy adviser at the Dutch Ministry of Transport and Security
Joan	F	24	Dutch-Indonesian (non-white)	Higher general secondary	Heterosexual	Unemployed
Job	M	20	Dutch (white)	Intermediate vocational	Homosexual	Officer at a health facility
Kiki	F	20	Dutch (white)	Pre-university	Bisexual	Student assistant
Laura	F	19	Dutch (white)	Higher general secondary	Heterosexual	Waitress in a restaurant
Moss	F	21	Dutch (white)	Pre-university	Heterosexual	Unemployed
Paige	F	21	Dutch-Surinamese (non-white)	Pre-university	Homosexual	Theatre programmer
Richard	M	23	Dutch (white)	Pre-university	Heterosexual	Dutch language teacher
Sacha	F	24	Dutch (white)	Higher general secondary	Heterosexual	Facility manager
Quinten	M	19	Dutch-Surinamese (non-white)	Intermediate vocational	Heterosexual	Cook