

Cluster Essays on World Youth Cultures

(EDITED BY DONALD E. HALL)

There's No Place Like Home: An Introduction and A Reading

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THIS CLUSTER OF essays and reviews offers the reader of *ARIEL* a brief introduction to and a set of explorations in an important, emerging field — the study of “youth culture” — especially as it is influenced by and reflective of new theories of globalization and hybridity. Indeed, John Tomlinson in his recent book, *Globalization and Culture*, suggests that transnational youth culture “provide[s] a figure for what a future ‘globalized popular culture’ may turn out to be like: different . . . in *character* from the integrating, ‘essentializing’ nature of national cultures, looser-textured, more protean, and relatively indifferent to the maintenance of sharp discriminations of cultural origin and belonging” (147). If, in fact, “youth culture” does provide that “figure,” then the essays here suggest it is time to explore thoughtfully just what that figure reveals.

Why have such explorations been so rare to date? Certainly the study of youth culture — transnational or more local — raises a host of potential problems for the academic and theorist. Depending on how we define the upper limits of “youth” — Is it eighteen, twenty-one, twenty-five? — most critics will fall outside of the definitional parameters of the group being “studied.” I am not at all convinced by Lawrence Friedman’s assertion in *The Horizontal Society* that “You can *join* the youth culture at any age — just as you can join a religion — by imitating its taste in music, its way of walking, talking, dressing, and cutting

your hair" (232). That observation certainly captures the elective nature of many identities today, but wholly ignores the specific age-related interests of and identity-political parameters chosen by the actual "youth" indicated in the phrase "youth culture." In many ways, it evinces the same condescension and assumption of universal access that characterized the social sciences of yesteryear. Could I "join" Jamaican culture by purchasing a certain shirt and wearing dreadlocks? Could I "join" lesbian separatist culture by appropriating certain modes of self-presentation? Of course not. But in considering "youth culture," adult academics often fail to see such moves as problematic, largely because of their own thorough acculturation into the naturalized, age-related power relationships that pervade Anglo-American and most other societies, ones often arising from and mirroring the dynamics of nuclear familial life (our assumed right to speak for "our" children). And certainly the deep-seated, conjoined dismissal and ownership of youth that pervades some adult (and adult academic) discourse is further complicated by the fact that we all pass through "youth," making any condescension appear all the more justified. Of course, this fiction of knowledge and authority glosses over the fact that the "youth culture" of ten or twenty years ago is not the "youth culture" of today. And even that diachronic pluralization grossly oversimplifies the synchronic complexity of the present moment.

This is *not* to say that we who are over twenty-five years have nothing to say about youth culture(s) or have no right to participate in certain aspects of youth culture(s). But our relationship to our work, our play, and/or our "subjects" must be a self-conscious and complex one. And this complexity is deepened even further by the sensitivities required in any discussion of the extra-local, the transnational, and/or global. As you will see in the brief reading of a Los Angeles youth (sub)cultural phenomenon that I offer below, I have no pat answers here. But not having those simple and definitive solutions certainly does not let us off of the hook of responsibility. We *can* speak out of local positions and contexts, make connections well beyond those, and yet still retain a sense of the epistemological limitations of our inevitable standpoint. This recognition and even

overt admission of partiality of perspective and inherent tendentiousness (of age, gender, race, class, and nationality) are fundamental to the production of readings and theories that move responsibly across time and space. This is more than a “double consciousness;” it is a multi-layered consciousness that of course still can never capture the complexity of the interpretive act. It is daunting work that we have chosen in cultural studies, and for those of us speaking about the complexity of age, as well as class, and ethnicity, the responsibilities attending our work can be practically paralyzing. No wonder so few cultural critics and theorists even attempt to — or are brave enough to — speak about “age” in their discussions of “subjectivity.” Even as we fine tune our theories of politicized social identity (queer, postcolonial, feminist), “age” and diachronic mutability (more generally) represent serious and largely ignored complications.

And as you will see in the essays and reviews that follow, those of us writing about “youth culture” are often faced with yet another layer of complexity if we choose to deal explicitly with music/aural culture. Not only is “sound” a notoriously difficult topic about which to write and generalize, but the complexity of today’s hybridized and electronically manipulated music, its production and reception, poses particular challenges. Angela McRobbie, who has written several important works on British youth and music culture, made this comment recently:

our critical vocabulary seems sadly lacking. None of the old words, like collage, montage, or postmodernism seem capable of capturing the velocity and scale of this [recent musical] output. Likewise, the older ways of making sense of music by placing different styles into different categories, or by posing the commercial against the creative or experimental, or by talking about white or black music as though they were quite distinct, are equally inappropriate. Now, in the late 1990s, we have to *start* with an assumption of musical hybridity, with global cultural cross-over and profound inter-penetrations of style. . . . (133; emphasis added)

Of course this state of hybridity, cross-over, and interpenetration can be seen as daunting or dynamic, or perhaps both at once, depending upon the degree to which one clings to those “older ways of making sense.”

As will soon be quite clear, the contributors to the present cluster struggle admirably with “new ways” of making sense and certainly find the complexity of world youth cultures today highly energizing rather than paralyzing. After I offer a brief reading of Southern California rave sub/culture, we move across the Atlantic to the dance floors of London, where Rafeeq Hasan reads from the “inside” the potentials and problematics of multicultural mixing in dance music and among club-goers. From there our discussion moves to India, where some of the same musical forms and mixes that Hasan explores are interpreted differently from the position of a cultural theorist, Anjali Gera, working among youth in India. Their observations support and usefully complement each other. The third essay, by Mary Ann Hunter, then looks at the cultural and trans-cultural dynamics of video self-presentation among young men in the hybrid space of Australia, adjacent to, apart from, opposed to, and uncomfortably within “Asian” cultural influences.

The four book reviews that conclude this cluster will give the reader a useful overview of writing about “youth culture” in the past few years. Those reviews and the ample notes and bibliographies contained in the essays that precede them can serve as points of departure for readers of this journal who find the challenges of the field under discussion a spur to scholarly and theoretical production. I would say that we who engage in youth-cultural studies have only scratched the surface here and in our work to date, but frankly I am not even sure that a scratch is discernible.

A Local Reading

Raves and related music and dance events certainly present formidable problems for cultural critics. Yet their intricacies have tended to evoke not multiple approaches and interpretations but rather a common reliance on a set of very simple interpretative lines. For one thing, there is a tendency to reduce “rave culture” to a homogenous, transnational phenomenon, with similar musical points of reference and a basic arc: a highpoint in the late 1980s/early 1990s and period of dramatic decline thereafter. This is clearly the assumption underlying Matthew

Collin's well-regarded study *Altered State*, which like most works examining rave culture focuses primarily, seemingly inevitably, on Great Britain. Yet there is a world of complexity lost in the Anglocentrism of that perspective. When in Costa Rica a couple of years ago, I found that the rave phenomenon was only beginning there; I met an enthusiastic young promoter who was planning the first large-scale outdoor rave ever in Costa Rica in the fall of the following year. Paul had sought out, read, and finally dismissed Collin's book as a somewhat interesting but predictably slanted "Anglo" work. And indeed, I had to admit to him that Euro-American cultural critics have as yet no methodology that would do justice to the intensity of the lived experiences of new Costa Rican ravers at the beginning of the millennium or even that of youth in Britain, Canada, or the US who embrace a phenomenon long after its first adherents declare it passé and have moved onto the next "cutting-edge" scene. Too often we in cultural studies seem to imply that because a cultural or subcultural phenomenon completes a certain lifespan in London or New York it has ended (or *should* have ended) for everyone everywhere. But even as I write this, someone somewhere is hearing Jimi Hendrix for the first time, discovering the Grateful Dead, or participating joyously in her or his first rave.

It is also worth noting here that Paul from Costa Rica spoke candidly about how few drugs other than pot and alcohol had made their way into the local scene, even though Collin's book, and others such as Simon Reynolds's *Generation Ecstasy*, take invariably as one of their central, even defining, "texts" the experience and influence of "E" (the drug ecstasy). I have long been uneasy with such a move: bodily sensations are always difficult to discuss as "text," and while "E" may be common at many raves in Britain and America, it is hardly universal and is neither singularly nor centrally "textual." Certainly one would never reduce pub "culture" in rural Britain in the nineteenth century or gay bar "culture" in 1970s New York to the physical experience of alcohol consumption and intoxication. I would suggest that alcohol in those cases, and often "E" in the case of rave "culture," provides something like a lubricant allowing certain phenomena to occur and perhaps altering or enhancing them

significantly, but that they neither solely define nor constitute “culture” in, of, or by themselves.

Thus one introductory point here is that we cultural critics might think much more carefully about particularizing rather than generalizing, and instead of looking always for the unifying elements of something like (in this instance) “transnational rave culture,” we may find it far more appropriate to examine the “subcultural” aspects of local scenes. Of course, this particularization runs against many of our critical instincts and almost all of our training. We critics often appear to be in search of a unified field theory, or in the phrasing of George Eliot’s *Causabon* from *Middlemarch*, a “key to all mythologies.” The existence of that “key,” however, almost always depends upon the careful suppressing of any conflicting or complicating information (as Eliot explored beautifully). The “key” to all rave culture is itself a myth.

So rather than indulge in even more myth-making, I want to stake out a very small cultural/subcultural terrain and admit at the outset that I still cannot do justice to its intricacies. Dance music and corporatized dance events are thriving in Southern California today, but frankly, the independently promoted rave scene is not. In fact, Reynolds does chart accurately a dramatic decline in its vibrancy and activity in Los Angeles from about mid-1992 on (160). And recent years have been particularly awful, with several accidental deaths at local raves in the late 1990s, a dramatic increase in police activity and shutdowns (even at “secure,” legal venues), and some shockingly poor practices and management by promoters — among them, false advertising of DJs and a disregard of patron needs in terms of entrance and exit points (which was largely responsible for a riot at “Nocturnal Wonderland” in San Bernardino, California, in September 1998 which I discuss below).

But rather than simply complaining about the “scene” — local publications do enough of that already — I want to examine briefly some of the peculiarities and particularities of the SoCal rave subculture, what it attempts to do and how it attempts to do it, given its problematic local context. Possible focal points for

analysis abound. For instance, one could certainly spend time musing over the influence of local geography on SoCal rave. The “desert” component of the broadly defined local scene — spreading out from Los Angeles through Riverside and San Bernardino Counties — is a distinguishing characteristic (shared in some aspects with scenes in Nevada, Arizona, and New Mexico), and one with both musical implications and a thorough imbrication with SoCal rave’s spiritual/transcendental/naturalist ethos. “Desert trance” and “desert breaks” are internationally recognized subgenres of electronic dance music originating locally. DJs such as John Kelley and several others on the Moonshine label have a recognizable sound that combines a syncopated funky breaks beat with an ethereal, tribal overlay capturing musically both a contemporary, urban technological “reality” and a desired reconnection with a subtle southwestern landscape today largely obscured (inside the megapolis of Los Angeles) by mini-malls and tract housing.

It is also worth noting that the music and dance combination could constitute a central text here, though it does not. Other works have covered the history and charted the intricacies of “rave”/techno/electronic music (and I’m neither a music historian nor an expert on the fine points of difference separating subgenres of “house,” for instance); furthermore, I find the individual experience of music perception and dance expression almost impossible to analyze. We do not have yet a particularly useful cultural critical vocabulary with which to discuss aural sensations and the bodily movements they evoke. Beyond juxtaposing a series of interviews or presenting technical matter on drug biochemistry and the physiology of dance movement, we are often stalled in forms of personal narration and description that can be as uninteresting as a sustained retelling of one’s dreams and as unverifiable as anecdotes about surreptitious sexual encounters.

So instead, I am going to focus briefly on a few aspects of the local scene that are rather more traditionally textual. One of the set of “texts” to which I will refer is that of the rave flyer — those advertisements passed out at events or left near the doors of record and trendy clothing stores. *Lotus Magazine*, a local

publication covering rave and dance events, has commented pertinently on them:

If it isn't the busts it's the stagnant scene people have been complaining about. Part of the stagnation that is settling into the scene is that a formula to throw events has been set.

Ingredients: 1) GLOSSY FLYER 2) 4 out of the same 20 DJs 3) Lots of flashy promotion. . . . It'd be nice if the glossy flyers truthfully represented the events. It's rather disappointing when a color glossy delivers you [to] some warehouse in Gardena. . . . Most people aren't dazzled by them anymore. ("Reports" 36)

The article argues for a return to the "purity" of the simple black and white flyer and to honest promotional practices. The latter may be an understandable desire, but I am not so sure about the former. There is nothing essentially "better" about simple, black & white flyers; colour and computer graphics allow an extraordinary range of nuanced expressions. Indeed, glossy flyerart is hardly a local phenomenon alone, and it even represents, in the perspective of many critics, an important new art form. While they might not impress some scene-goers, a number of art books — such as the British-based publications *Highflyers: clubravepartyart*, *Sight for Sound*, and *Nocturnal: Global Highflyers* — are, in fact, devoted to the flyer as an internationally thriving creative genre. Interestingly, none of those works, even the ones that reproduce San Francisco-originating and other American flyerart, contain any examples from or even reference to the Los Angeles area. One reason for that is obvious to anyone who knows local flyerart: copyright. While Cynthia Rose celebrates flyerart as "semiotic guerilla warfare" (qtd. in Thornton 141) such warfare can easily generate counterattacks. Artbook and academic publishers are hardly going to risk legal action by the profit-driven Hollywood entertainment industry, whose images are often illegally reproduced on flyers and who would not hesitate to sue a press for copyright infringement. In fact, that is a primary reason that even as I discuss and describe I will not attempt to reproduce flyerart here.

Rose's comment above points to a Certeauan theory base that I, too, will build upon, for I find in Michel de Certeau's theory of tacticality a way of isolating both the potentials and

inevitable limitations of subcultural resistance. It bears repeating and remembering that in *The Practice of Everyday Life* Certeau argues that a “tactic” is a response from within. Unlike a “strategy” which is based on clearly demarcated “sides,” a tactic draws a given discursive context in perverse ways: “The place of a tactic belongs to the other. A tactic insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance” (xix). “The space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power” (37). As indicated in Rose’s reference to “guerrilla warfare,” tactics represent skirmishes with hegemonic power structures, using pre-existing signs and properties in ways abrasive to established interests; they do not result in clearcut “victories” so much as incremental shifts and minor gains. Indeed, we are doomed to disappointment if we ever expect a “tactic” to overthrow wholly the sign system upon which it depends and which it actually helps to maintain through its continuing points of reference.

So what are the component parts of that cultural/ideological/discursive “terrain” of Southern California? Simon Reynolds has a descriptive paragraph concerning the Los Angeles scene in the early 1990s that attempts to capture its qualities, partially through a quote from an editor of Los Angeles-based *Urb* magazine

Fashion and “balls out hedonism” . . . defined Los Angeles rave. But there was a utopian aspect to Southern California’s rave scene — the racial mixing that was going on. “It was the first time in my lifetime I saw people from every neighborhood — San Diego, Riverside, San Bernardino, Long Beach — coming together,” says Todd Roberts. “Every weekend you’d see a lot of people you’d never even come into contact with. It was especially nice, being African American myself, to see black youth involved and not just a bunch of white kids acting weird. Rave allowed me to talk about and see LA as a better community than most people give it credit for. It is a very divided city. But this was the first time those walls were breaking down. . . . Utopian? It was as utopian as LA could get!” (160)

That was a decade ago now, before ticket prices skyrocketed and limited the rave-going clientele to those who can afford a

\$35 or \$40 ticket, rendering it considerably less diverse today. Yet what does persist is the scene's odd mixture of "fashion" and "utopian" language. It continues to exist within a very troubled social environment, to which it attempts to respond, but one that also, in quintessentially subcultural ways, accounts for some of the scene's components, such as its "fashion" emphasis. For the now primarily middle to upper-middle class rave-going population, Southern California is a cultural terrain dominated by the film and television industry (even more so than elsewhere in this country because so many people in the Los Angeles area — young and adult alike — are employed in the entertainment industry), constructed around principles of consumerism and "look-ism" (cosmetic surgery ads are ubiquitous in the local media), and finally (for reasons not wholly unconnected with the characteristics I just mentioned) too often fractured by unhappy domestic and familial life.

In "playing on" and responding to, but also being discursively determined by that local cultural force field, the SoCal rave subculture has some predictable, even inevitable, defining characteristics. It poaches aggressively on media culture for its references and icons, it is often as cosmetically "glossy" as the city and milieu to which it is responding, and it is, unfortunately, plagued with some of the very dysfunctions that its youthful adherents in particular encounter on their own domestic terrain and attempt to escape through the rave scene itself.

Certainly LA flyerart captures this cultural/subcultural dynamic. Whether or not the flyers accurately represent the rave event that occurs is beside the point here (though that could be the focal point of an equally useful discussion). Far more important for my purposes is that they represent the ethos that promoters are actively attempting to construct or that they are simply calculating will appeal to their target audience. While British and other flyerart is often "futuristic" (SciFi and glam-referencing) in design and content, SoCal flyerart is distinctly media-centered and often unabashedly nostalgic, referencing both recent and "classic" television and film. Among the flyers circulating in the past few years are ones referencing Ren & Stimpy (with a clear emphasis on the latter — "Happy, happy,

joy, joy!”), the Rugrats, Winnie the Pooh, Johnnie Quest, Sesame Street, and Walt Disney’s “It’s a Small World.” And while the rhetoric of “family” and “alternative family” is common throughout British and American rave culture, it is explicit and ubiquitous in the flyerart of the SoCal scene. F.A.M.I.L.L.Y. IS in fact the name of a well-known local promotional group. The flyer for its third anniversary party in 1997 is a simple photo from 1960s suburbia showing a comforting circle of broadly smiling, loving family members, wearing birthday hats and surrounded by balloons, about to begin a game of hide-and-go-seek in their nice, clean living room. A grinning, blindfolded man in the center of the circle reaches out to start the game. The use of the image may be unquestionably ironic — the now outdated clothing and furniture marking it as “different from” rather than “similar to” the scene — but I would suggest that its imbrication within pre-existing norms and discourses exemplify a “tactic” with all of its possibilities and limitations. When the blindfolded man in the photo heads out to the rave his clothing will change significantly and glowsticks will replace balloons as accoutrements, but he is going to carry with him his faith that the semi-closed circle (open just enough to allow the viewer into it) will continue to surround and support him, that it will take responsibility for keeping danger at bay, and that, whatever happens, everyone will continue to smile broadly.

Indeed, the affective pull of highly supportive family life is ubiquitous in the local scene, even when the word “family” is not used explicitly: “Cand-e Productions . . . requires all types of people to come together and share a feeling, creating a bond” (Sugar, 1997); “Love people. Find that lovable quality that is in each of US, put the other person ahead of yourself, and the love you give will return to you!” (Juju Beats, 1997); “The People Who Love You Organization” (another local promoter) says “Let your inner child play freely” (Opium 1998). Indeed, this nostalgia for and evocation of an idealized version of childhood is common in much American rave culture, Southern Californian and beyond. Oversized clothes, bright plastic jewellery, stuffed animals, and pacifiers are staples, and beyond their utility (easy hiding of drugs, protecting the inside of one’s mouth

from "E"-induced bruxism), they all point toward a longing for a return to an idealized, heavily nostalgized version of the innocence and playfulness of early childhood. This is captured clearly in another flyer, for "Candyland" (1998) co-sponsored by "Family" and the "People Who Love You." The referencing of the game "Candyland" locates us firmly within the realm of suburban childhood. The image shows two blissful, blond children marching forward and holding hands (with pupils ecstatically dilated) and suggests a joyous but safe excursion to a (perhaps racially homogenous) playground. But most telling of all is the use of intensifiers in the instructions superimposed over the image, to "Please bring lots of Love, Hugs, a big smile, Candy & Toys to share. You must have a positive attitude & the ability to make new friends," which bespeaks an urgent response to a troubled context. Part of that trouble is the trouble with the rave scene itself, in which bad attitudes and bad drugs can too often ruin an event. But these bad attitudes and irresponsible drug use hardly originate in the activities of the rave scene; they are, again, part of the culture that surrounds and affects/effects rave subculture.

Indeed, the urgency of the prescription of specific qualities for a new and loving family has everything to do with the troubles of "real" Southern California domestic scenes, which Mike Males has written about extensively in *The Scapegoat Generation* and *Framing Youth* (reviewed later in this issue). Males provides troubling data on the often rank hypocrisy plaguing family life in America generally, but in California in particular ("the arch-violent state" [SG 109]), where emotional and physical violence against children and adolescents is endemic and where the rhetoric of "family values" masks a reality of youth-distrust and even youth-hatred. In Males's opinion, today's adults evince "state-of-the art hypocrisy:"

[A] Baby Boomer's average marriage lasts only 80 months. Our males have set sky-rocketing records of child abandonment and deadbeat daddyism. Half of us admitted illegal drug use and non-marital sex, and a similar number to driving drunk. And Clinton and Gingrich threaten youths with dire punishments for violating *our* reverence toward "family values" and "personal responsibility,"

for experimenting with marijuana, for having sex before marriage? Could it be that this is self-exoneration of a Baby Boom generation afraid to face the damage of our own unrestrained self-indulgence?
(SG 41-42)

Males offer compelling statistics to demonstrate just how appallingly many American and Californian adults treat adolescents and children; his books point toward a host of disingenuous adult behaviours in the 1990s and beyond, in which youth are both pathologized and dismissed, are alternately ignored and vilified by parents and media alike (a dynamic that James Kincaid has also examined in his *Erotic Innocence*). It is a truism perhaps to state that the rave scene, along with cliques and gangs, are mechanisms by which unhappy and disaffected youth attempt to construct a structure of validation to replace that which they lack at home and at school. In some ways, this has been the case at least since *Oliver Twist*, with its London subculture of boy pickpockets. But, of course, there are always local inflections and, more importantly, some striking local intensifications.

Given the trends discussed by Robin Wolf in her recent overview of the "Problems of California's Families" (including particularly intense local manifestations of sexual abuse, divorce, and parental indifference to the needs of youth) and those discussed by Anne Hendershott in her careful probing of the mistaken, destructive hysteria in California in the late 1990s over "juvenile delinquency," it is hardly surprising the often-repeated plea coming from the Southern California rave scene is for earnestness and nonjudgmental, mutual support. That is precisely what is lacking in contemporary urban/suburban family life and discourse in (and beyond) the LA region. Thus the "Vision" statement of "Countdown '98" (1997) reads as follows:

Come with open minds, positive attitudes, a readiness to dance, and a great time will be guaranteed. . . . We are the teachers of tomorrow, and are [sic] quest is to gather strength through unity and become as one. Together, we shall create an environment of true benevolence previously unknown to the world.

In the words of "Nation" (1998),

We understand to survive we must break down all barriers that separate us and erase the lines that divide. . . . One nation, underground, indivisible. Only in a unified state can our family and culture survive and progress. . . . The strength and power of love, pounding strong like an atomic bomb. Our bass and booms heard round the world, as our nation moves positively forward through 2000.

An interesting image, is it not? Love pounding strong like an atomic bomb: destruction and reconstruction simultaneously, with the emphasis still on a redefined family that serves as the basis of a possibly reconfigured nation. But, of course, even if the impulse toward redefinition and reconstruction of family is clear and unequivocal, the language, the imagery, and, the subjectivities of the individuals involved are formed elsewhere, are part of that larger power matrix that tactics can poach on, can mock and subvert, but can neither fully escape nor simply overthrow.

And this brings me to two powerful Hollywood images and ironic commentaries on the limitations of tacticality. "Oz" and "Neverland" are annual raves held in the LA area; both evoke powerful media-driven fantasies of escape from worries, from the mundane boredom of daily existence, from growing up into corrupt adulthood, and from the limitations of pre-existing family life. Sponsored by GVC (Good Vibe Crew), their flyers, like that of the F.A.M.I.L.Y. event, centre on images of loving, supportive circles: Dorothy is surrounded by a halo and her compatriots in Oz, and Peter Pan and the Darling children fly in a swirl above Never Never Land. Like some of the images mentioned earlier, both suggest the possibility of protective and protected space within a context of fun and adventure-seeking.

But as we know, neither Dorothy nor the Darling children of *Peter Pan* really escape. Wendy still has to look after the boys and deal with the ire of Tinkerbell; Dorothy takes responsibility not only for Toto but also three impaired fellow travellers. And what they both find is that Oz and Never Never Land are very dangerous places, full of many of the same stresses and, in the case of Oz, the very same personalities as Dorothy's home life was. These visions of alternate realities are revealed to be parts and

parcels of preexisting discursive terrains. Dorothy's and Wendy's returns to their original homes are inevitable because they cannot escape prior definitions, and in the case of Dorothy, she never really left anyway.

"There's no place like home," is Dorothy's chant at the end of her trip to Oz, one that is oddly appropriate for our discussion here. What she means, of course, is that "home" is finally the best of all possible places, but we can find another implication: that there is absolutely no place even resembling "home" (with that construct's signalling of an idealized degree of autonomy, support, safety, and love) anywhere to be found. Now I am not so cynical as to say that that is exactly the case, but clearly tactic-based, subcultural responses can help clarify and provide a temporary refuge from fundamental cultural problems, but they rarely solve them, especially when the tactics are nostalgia-based. As Stephanie Coontz points out in *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* and *The Way We Really Are: Coming to Terms with America's Changing Families*, nostalgia and its evocations of purity and perfection can be a highly destructive force. In grossly oversimplifying what families "used to" or "should" mean, in expecting harmony without discord or dissent, we are setting ourselves up for failure, because these are simply not within the realm of human possibility. As Coontz comments, nostalgia "keeps people so busy grieving for a misremembered past that they cannot identify . . . possibilities in the present, far less plan effectively for the future. . . . [T]he biggest lesson of the past is that there are no solutions there" (*The Way We Never Were* 176). And what is striking here is that the same nostalgia for a "perfect" past that Coontz finds ubiquitous in American culture today, often accounting for parents' attitudes toward their children, is equally true for the Los Angeles rave subcultural response, with its Disney and television icons, and its often added layer of nostalgia for an early 1990s rave purity. And in both cases what is particularly troubling is the lingering expectation of, and sometimes explicit promise of, an *autonomous perfection* when such perfection is clearly impossible and that when unmet can lead to disillusionment and worse.

Nostalgia and a promise of autonomous perfection by themselves carry some pernicious possibilities, but one local promotional team, Insomniac, knows how to combine the two in a particularly explosive combination. Insomniac is the sponsor of two high-profile annual rave events "Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory" and "Nocturnal Wonderland." With only small variations, the annual flyer for "Willy Wonka" always uses the same image: an outward spiral of chocolate coming from the embracing arms of the overtly messianic Willy Wonka (Gene Wilder), as it evokes yet another childhood film vision of a "candyland" with a promise of escape and pleasure and a lack of worry. The reverse side of the flyer says, "For the child in all of us," and promises a "scrumpdidlyumptious dream come true." The irony would be amusing if it were not so troubling. If you remember, all of the kids except Charlie in *Willy Wonka* get subjected to at least corporal and perhaps capital punishment. One out of five kids in the film has a good time, which may be about the average for many SoCal raves in the past few years.

A clear case in point is "Nocturnal Wonderland" (1998) which was built around an "Alice in Wonderland" theme. Its program asks its attendees to "declare that you've left behind all cares. . . . Leave behind all wrongful education" and states, "Making this voyage possible is a group effort — from the massive family of people that work on events right down to every smiling face that comes out to have fun. You make it possible so lets join together and rise up for this peaceful revolution." But Alice, like Dorothy and Wendy, ends up making a trip to a very dangerous place, and in the succinct narrative provided by *Urb* magazine, here's what actually happened at "Nocturnal Wonderland":

Apparently, tickets available at the front gate were sold out, and capacity was reached inside the venue relatively early on. Consequently, a mob of 3000-plus would-be ravers gathered outside the gates and were told to sit back and wait patiently. Many of the crowd had already purchased pre-sale tickets or were on the guest list, but were still unable to get in. The police then made several announcements over speakers mounted on . . . helicopters requesting that everyone outside return to their vehicles. But ticket-holders were

not about to give up so easily. At around midnight, five-o [the police] decided to drop tear-gas bombs on the crowd still waiting out front. Thousands hit the streets. Cops shot rubber bullets into the crowd, which quickly cleared the streets. . . . At around 1:30 am the choppers returned to the lots where the ravers had been herded. Without any warning, tear gas was again released, sending everyone scrambling to their vehicles for cover as cops swept the area. So much for a nocturnal wonderland. (147)

Pasquale Rotella, the founder of *Insomniac*, later admitted in *Lotus Magazine* that fault lay in many places. There was a door management problem, the venue did not provide adequate entrance points, and that the crowd of “smiling faces” was “tired of the delays, [and] started rushing the gates, climbing fences and throwing things . . . [T]he people in front of the crowd were being squished by pressure from the back. Some people were even suffocating” (“Know Your Promoter” 30). Suffocation, frustration, violence, authoritarian crackdown: frankly it *was* family life in some of its least laudable aspects. Of course, no one at the event left “wrongful education” behind because that “education” was always already there — not only in the subjectivities of the ravers but even built into the very frames of reference of the rave event itself.

So what is the upshot to this brief introductory “reading” from Los Angeles? Certainly not that resistance is futile or that rave subcultural responses are worthless — rather that “absolutes” are recipes for disaster, that tactics are always impure, and that fantasies that one can create wholly different structures while using the same points of reference are nocturnal nightmares waiting to happen. But if “purity” is a pernicious concept, what is left to us as critics, ravers, or both? Complexity, supple understanding, and, at the very least, some honest attempts on both the social and personal levels to improve on our collective attitude toward and treatment of youth, with and alongside subcultural tactics responding to the same. Males offers the following pertinent quotation and conclusion:

Our youth are no healthier or sicker than we, their parents. They reflect us in their psychological defenses, beliefs, ideals, relationships, and behavior.” Whether compared by state, era, or race, or

combinations of the three, the mathematical correlations between rates of (and trends in) teenage and adult sexual, homicidal, suicidal, criminal, and other behaviors typically display near one-to-one correspondence. In plain English, they act just like us.

(*Scapegoat* 34-35)

To the extent that his observations are true (while never denying the distinct qualities and interests of youth and youth culture), I would certainly suggest reading the texts of the rave scene as a starting point for the transformation of the larger culture that surrounds it. The scene's problems are largely our problems. And I am not just talking about LA here. When we as cultural critics set up facile interpretive structures — of global meta-narratives of progress and decline, of condescension and implicit nostalgia, or even of unassailable authoritative voice — we are doing violence to the complexity of the very cultures and subcultures with which we should be engaging multiply and complexly.

Indeed, a simple point that I often try to make to my undergraduate and graduate students in theory-based classes, and one that I tell them — critics, inside and outside of the academy, often forget — is this: "Let the text (whether of a literary, musical, or other cultural form) be more complex than and exceed the theory and interpretive mechanism that you bring to it." In other words, critics, friends, family members, and fellow ravers, none of us should ever be afraid to say, *I don't have all of the answers*. But that does not mean we have to give up asking questions.

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