



# Embodied techno-space: An auto-ethnography on affective citizenship in the techno electronic dance music scene



Martin Zebracki

School of Geography, University of Leeds, United Kingdom

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines auto-ethnographical experience with bodily participation in spaces of techno electronic dance music (EDM). The article engages with how inner- and inter-corporeal lived experience in techno-space constructs affective citizenship on the very personal level of the participant-researcher. In this context, the article attends to the underexplored field of how affective citizenship is attained and valued along embodied knowledge of subcultural capital in the EDM scene. It particularly addresses its overlooked gendered/sexual and technologically mediated (e)motional body. Drawing on a feminist scholar-artist method, the article renders embodied encounters with techno-space through evocative vignettes that include affective writing, a drawing and introspective poetic revelation. This method aims to convey embodied knowledge of techno-space as creative transformative experience beyond conventional modes of retrospective narration. The article concludes with two key lived experiences of affective citizenship: first, at times the gendered/sexual and cyborgian body was mobilised into a state of emotionally shared publicness that co-produced techno-space. Second, (inter)actions in techno-space incited subcultural capital as a set of tacit knowledge assets (including affective, empathic and therapeutic qualities) to be accumulated over techno events and to be occasionally transferred to inclusive participation in the everyday life.

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## 1. Introduction

Scholarship has still to expand conceptual and empirical engagement with *personal* affective dimensions of participation in socio-sonic dance space (cf. Thomas, 2003; Duffy et al., 2011). This article presents an auto-ethnographical examination of participation in the electronic dance music (EDM) scene of techno, a type of music for which I have a long-standing passion. The EDM scene has been particularly discussed with regard to the cultural and political economy (cf. Fraser, 2012) as well as the formation of subcultural capital (i.e. skills and values) at the communal level of ‘citizenship’: ascribed or self-appropriated set of rights, acts and responsabilisations (Thornton, 1995). However, the *lived* sense of citizenship through personal, embodied knowledge (via e.g. dance/movement and acts of free expression) at the very grounded level of techno-space remains less clear in the articulation of EDM subcultural capital (cf. Garcia, 2013; see also Cohen, 2007). The article, as such, attends to multi-sensorial experience of techno-space along my

bodily (co-)presence and interactive (e)motions, where affect is taken as the “motion of emotion” (Thien, 2005, 451; cf. Barbour and Hitchmough, 2014). Such affective experience with non-representational aspects of everyday life practices has become particularly significant to social sciences since the corporeal turn in the 2000s (Davidson and Bondi, 2004; Thien, 2005).

I argue that nuanced insights into affective citizenship in the techno EDM scene may be appropriately gained from adopting the feminist tenet of embodied, situated knowledges (Haraway, 1991). That is to say, all embodied knowledge rendered in this article is derived from my own bodily locus at the very micro-level of techno events. I make no attempt to represent and, hence, disembodiment experiences of other bodies, to essentialise my perspective and to produce claims about ‘the scene’ (despite the circulation of myriads of stereotypes in some ‘outsider’ narratives; cf. Thornton, 1995; Sicko, 1999). Having said that, I still recognise the partiality of my embodied knowledge as it is constructed through my positionality as a self-identified outed gay, cis-gendered, urban middle-class, Western European, young, white male person, who is moreover high-educated, socio-economically privileged, able-bodied/‘fit’ and highly digitally literate. This article, hence, examines how techno-

E-mail address: [M.M.Zebracki@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:M.M.Zebracki@leeds.ac.uk).

space is lived in the personal body and provides particular attention to the gendered/sexual dimensions of corporeal participation in techno-space. As the techno EDM scene, specifically the creation of *digital* musical content and the *electronic* transmission of sound, intrinsically holds a specific, innate relationship to the (still under-examined) role of technology in live embodied performance (Bougaïeff, 2013), I also call attention to this particular dimension. I contemplate a full auto-ethnographical approach as powerful in explaining the operation of affective citizenship at techno-space's grounded gendered/sexual and technologically mediated level.

This article proceeds as follows. Section 2 elaborates affective citizenship of the techno EDM scene/techno-space with an explicit concern with how subcultural capital is lived in corporeal relation to gender/sexuality and technology. Section 3 discusses my auto-ethnographical methodology. I present my first-hand experience on the basis of evocative vignettes in Sections 4 and 5. Section 6 concludes the article with a set of synthesising reflections and meanings of affective citizenship to the everyday life.

## 2. Techno-space and affective citizenship

Techno, sometimes associated with 'minimal' considering its repetitive compositional structure, originated in Detroit's underground scene in the mid-1980s. It is often classified as 'underground' and part of the subcultural rave movement (Sicko, 1999), whilst it is also associated with the desire to create an 'urban cosmopolitan sound' (Cohen, 2007). I use the term techno-space interchangeably with techno EDM scene to emphasise EDM venues as 'assemblage' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) of sound, matter and people along kinaesthetics: (the study on) (self-)experience of bodily movements. This scene usually involves young and gender-mixed crowds, which are yet more balanced towards males (Lysloff and Leslie, 2003). The techno EDM scene is mostly associated with indoor clubbing (albeit beyond the 'conventional' club) within the night-time economy. It has become a widespread and some might even argue 'mainstream' phenomenon in 'cosmopolitan' cities such as Berlin, Paris and Chicago (Rapp, 2010). Techno venues typically consist of one or multiple stages where artists produce live and/or recorded (i.e. disk-jockeyed) music, a floor for audience members to dance and have interpersonal encounters, and any other facilities characteristic of clubs (drink bars, lavatories, potentially sitting or chill zones, etc.). But there is large variety in the socio-spatial entourage of techno events, e.g. they can also be hosted in temporary spaces such as in party tents during festivals' daytime or night programmes (cf. St. John, 2009; Garcia, 2011).

As demonstrated by Fraser (2012), considerable literature exists on *what* EDM/techno-space spatio-politically implies in terms of matters such as cultural economic management and the production of 'hedonistic' crowds. However, there is still considerably little known about *how* techno-space is experienced and lived through at the very personal level and what this imports to the individual's affective sense of citizenship. This type of music has its origin in tribal traditions, e.g. West African drumming. It is characteristic of intensive common-time central rhythmic components that may have the capacity to affectively send dancing, high-intensity moving human bodies into an ecstatic state (St. John, 2009; Sylvan, 2013). Affect of techno music is "associated with a significant increase in heart rate, systolic blood pressure and significant changes in self-rated emotional states" (Gerra et al., 1998, 99). Such context of 'heightened emotion' (Barbour and Hitchmough, 2014), which can even be hyper-enhanced by the use of stimulants (Moore, 2012), makes techno-space a compelling site to conduct affective research on how this space is bodily acted out through intense self-participation. It is the sensorial 'altogetherness' of music, matter, bodies, movement and inter-corporeal interactions that is at stake

in this auto-ethnographical study on affective citizenship: how does it *feel* to be a citizen of techno-space?

Affective citizenship has been used in various contexts to describe inter-citizen emotional relationships (Johnson, 2010), global, 'post-human' intimacies produced by scientific, industrial and technological forces (Brydon, 2007), and sensible engagements with cultural difference and transformation (Mookherjee, 2005). Garcia (2015) reads these multi-dimensional levels of affective citizenship in reference to the 'techno-migrant' who negotiates a sense of belonging along encountered difference in the host city. Nevertheless, in this article, I scale affective citizenship down: literally to the ground of techno-space, while reckoning the broader contexts of subculturalism. Hereinafter, I explain how affective citizenship in techno-space is constructed/deconstructed through 'lived experience' (Anderson and Harrison, 2010) of subcultural capital and perspectives of gender/sexuality and technological mediation.

### 2.1. Lived subcultural capital

Techno-space is a practised place where participants accumulate and exchange 'subcultural capital' (Thornton, 1995 in Fitzgerald, 2015, 57): skills and values that are coupled with "the concrete practices of production and consumption". They import embodied aesthetics and codes as expressed by music, fashion, language, etc. in interplay with various social identity markers such as class, age, gender and sexuality (Bennett, 2001; Sicko, 1999). Techno-space, hence, does not just imply a singular and coherent 'crowd togetherness' (Bougaïeff, 2013). Sensorial multiplicities of belonging/alienation, self/community and inclusion/(self-)exclusion, etc. are negotiated alongside (contra)identifications (Shank, 1994; Reynolds, 1998). This particular view is propagated by *post*-subcultural discourse (e.g. Thornton, 1995; Redhead, 1997; Muggleton and Weinzierl, 2003). Although such discourse is fragmented over political, economic and cultural facets (ibid.), it overall eschews the classic Bourdieuan distinction between 'high' and 'low' culture (Thornton, 1995). Instead, *post*-subculturalism fosters an immersive experience of cultural 'non-differentiation' (Hutson, 1999) and unveils the fluidity of class along what MacCannell (1976) described as the universal desire for cultural expression that is 'authentic' in and of itself.

However, (post-)subcultural discourse has still to more firmly address personal affective dimensions beyond production and consumption schemes of economic commodification (Fitzgerald, 2015). I embark on an affective participatory perspective that reflects on micro-local sensorial multiplicities of, e.g., kinaesthetics (movement/dance), hearing, sight, touch, smell and proprioception (sensed relations of somatic parts of the self and other) (Potter, 2008). Such corporeal affective citizenship is, nevertheless, situated in a wider context of subculturalism; that is to say, practised techno-spaces are co-constitutive of broader, 'glocal' cultural trends (Thornton, 1995; Collin, 2009).

Bennett (2001) indicated that participation in dance music spaces is likely to be attended with 'felt' understandings of cultural difference based on encounters with different people in the course of the event. This might be helpful in acquiring more diversified skills and values. However, as expressed by Rapp (2010), there are limits to the heterogeneity of subcultural scenes, which depend on dynamics in matters such as local demographics, local cultural participation and shared interests, club door policies and visitors' streams. On the latter, Rapp (2010) used the term 'techno tourism' to describe a somewhat homogenous, overly young and yuppified elite: the 'Easyjet set', travelling through places often just for a few days of clubbing. Techno-spaces are therefore not void of corporeal transversalities of class and privilege.

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