

Can aesthetic experience function as a mediator between individual identity and collective experience

How do aesthetic experiences, and by extension the aesthetic form of said experiences such as their sensory qualities, structure, or intensity, create bridges between personal identity and shared collective experience? Through the works of writers such as Adorno, Anzaldua, Lorde, and Foucault, we can analyse what is meant by the terms 'aesthetic experience, personal identity, and collective experience' and how these concepts interact and influence each other. To exemplify these ideas, we can turn to techno music and the broader rave culture and apply this example to the concepts at hand. This reveals how aesthetic experience actively shapes the relation between personal identity and collective experience and functions as a mediator between them. The rave, with its repetitive musical structure, immersive sensory environments, and ritualistic practices, demonstrates how the aesthetic form of an experience can generate spaces where personal identity dissolves into collective experience while simultaneously enabling the emergence of new forms of (oftentimes political) subjectivity.

Before we begin answering the question at hand we must first begin by defining certain terms. What is meant by "aesthetic experience", "personal identity", and "collective experience"? For Theodor Adorno, aesthetic experience can be seen as a mode of relation to objects that differs from rationality and everyday perception. It is an experience in which the subject encounters the object "for its own sake", something that he refers to as the "freedom to the object" (Amiri and Maziar, 2024). Aesthetic experience can thus be seen as operating through negativity, it disrupts the habitual ways of seeing and allows the work to resist simple labels and reveal tensions hidden in everyday life (Adorno, 1970). In doing so, it preserves forms of feeling and freedom that our routines tend to suppress. Aesthetic experience can then be seen as encountering a work on its own terms, without habitual perception, so that new possibilities of feelings and thought can emerge. Next we can turn to "individual identity" and in turn look at the work of Gloria Anzaldua. Anzaldua sees personal identity as emerging through "the quest for the self, for the center of the self...the dark, the feminine" (Anzaldua, 1983, p. 169). Personal identity is not given but must be actively constructed through aesthetic practice, in her world through writing, which becomes "the act of making soul" (Anzaldua, 1983, p. 169). Personal identity can further be seen as embodied, as she writes: "writing with your eyes like painters, with your ears like musicians, with your feet like dancers" (Anzaldua, 1983, p. 173) and shaped by marginalisation. Identity is fragmented and must be actively integrated: women of colour have been made to "split apart from ourselves" and remain "in search of that self, that 'other'" (Anzaldua, 1983, p. 169). Turning to the idea of "collective experience", this can be seen as something that emerges specifically from shared marginalisation and the collective struggle for voice and recognition. Anzaldua addresses "third world women writers" as a collective defined by common experiences of silencing and exclusion (Anzaldua, 1983). Audre Lorde, on the other hand, writes about giving "name to the nameless so it can be thought" (Lorde, 1985 p. 126), which suggests that collective experience requires aesthetic practices that articulate shared but previously unarticulated feelings and conditions. The collective emerges through the recognition that "our feelings were not meant to survive" under systems "defined by profit, by linear power, by institutional dehumanization" (Lorde, 1985, p. 127) and through the shared work of ensuring those feelings survive.

With understanding of what I mean by the aforementioned terms, we can turn to the question of whether aesthetic experience can function as a mediator between

individual identity and collective experience. Adorno's aesthetic theory establishes how art operates both as an autonomous object and a social force. For Adorno, artworks function as self-contained things that appear separate from society yet bear the social reality from which they emerge (Adorno, 1970). This idea is the foundation through which we can understand how aesthetic experience mediates between individual and collective experience. As Adorno argues, art becomes social due to the possibility of this art to radically oppose the society in which it is produced (Adorno, 1970).

To exemplify this dialectical relationship, I turn to techno music and the rave scene as a whole. Emerging from the post-industrial ruins of Detroit in the 1980s, techno was a sonic, or musical, response to the urban decay, racial segregation, and economic stagnation plaguing Detroit at the time. Underground Resistance, a politically explicit techno collective, articulated this resistance through their own description as "a label for a movement. A movement that wants change by sonic revolution" (Smith, 2014). At the same time, techno's political power, or collective power to bring people together through shared experience, does not reside in explicit lyrical content or through some form of representational imagery, instead its force emerges through its formal qualities. The repetition of the 4/4 kick drum, the mechanical sound of its rhythms, and the emphasis on said rhythms over melody. These formal characteristics are what Robert Hood describes as a "revolution," a sound based territory where the status quo of what constitutes appealing sound is temporarily suspended, and in this way, where the status quo of capitalist culture is temporarily suspended (Hinton, 2017). The repetitive structure of techno serves to disrupt the linear, productive time. It is not based around efficiency, accumulation, and forward progress but around a repetitive rhythm which McKenzie Wark calls "rave-time", a tempo measured not in productive output but in the intensity of present experience (Rose, 2023). This temporal disruption allows individual participants to step outside their socially determined roles (worker, consumer, citizen) and enter a space where identity becomes fluid and collectively negotiated.

Aesthetic experience further operates through feeling and embodied knowledge to bridge individual sensation with collective consciousness (sometimes even collective political consciousness). Audre Lorde's "Poetry is Not a Luxury" can showcase this very idea. For Lorde, poetry is "a vital necessity of our existence" (Lorde, 1985, p. 126). Poetry functions as illumination, giving name to those ideas which are, until the poem, nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt (Lorde, 1985, p. 125). This process moves from experience to feeling to idea to action. Similarly, the rave (or collectively dancing to electronic music, in this case techno music) can exemplify this vision of aesthetic experience rooted in feeling rather than thought. The physical intensity of dancing for hours, the sensory immersion in the sound, the opening of deep feeling through rhythm and collective movement; these create access to those "ancient and hidden" places of power that Lorde identifies. The rave does not operate through discursive argument or rational persuasion; it works through Lorde's "skeleton architecture of our lives" (Lorde, 1985, p. 127). Moreover, Lorde's claim that "there are no new ideas still waiting in the wings to save us... There are only old and forgotten ones, new combinations, extrapolations and recognitions from within ourselves" (Lorde, 1985, p. 127) resonates with the rave's function as a space for recovering suppressed forms of collective experience. The rave does not invent new collective forms from scratch, rather it calls back to ritual, to dance, to pre-linguistic modes of collectively sharing an experience and bonding that can be seen as having been systematically devalued within structures "defined by profit, by linear power, by institutional dehumanization" where our "feelings were not meant to survive" (Lorde, 1985, p. 127). Thus, the rave and techno music's aesthetic form: its repetition, its immersion, its emphasis on bodily sensation

creates conditions where feeling can survive and rebel against the status quo and become the basis for not just shared collective consciousness, but also the basis for a shared political consciousness (through the acceptance that the participants are actively and collectively engaging in rebellion against the status quo).

Anzaldua's "Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Woman Writers" extends Lorde's emphasis on feeling by insisting on the radical embodiment of aesthetic practice. For Anzaldua, the obstacles facing women of colour writers are internalised issues relating to personal identity. "Who gave us permission to perform the act of writing? Why does writing seem so unnatural for me?" (Anzaldua, 1983, p. 166). She describes a voice in her head that makes her question herself: "Who am I, a poor Chicanita from the sticks, to think I could write?" (Anzaldua, 1983, p. 166). The dominant culture tells women of colour to "Stop speaking in tongues, stop writing left-handed" (Anzaldua, 1983, p. 166). Yet Anzaldua insists that precisely this embodied, marginalised experience must become the substance of writing. She urges to "Write with your eyes like painters, with your ears like musicians, with your feet like dancers" (Anzaldua, 1983, p. 173). Writing must come from the body, for "it's not on paper that you create but in your innards, in the gut and out of living tissue" (Anzaldua, 1983, p. 172). In this way, aesthetic practice can be seen as a personal struggle. "The act of writing is the act of making soul, alchemy. It is the quest for the self, for the center of the self" (Anzaldua, 1983, p. 169). Likewise, the backdrop through which techno raves emerges are from a place of marginalisation. It began as a place where bodies that were excluded could have a safe space, namely it started as a safe space for African-Americans who identified as members of LGBTQ+. It then expanded to be a safe space and a place to be yourself to anyone who feels marginalised (Kakaire, 2019). Much like Anzaldua's vision of writing, techno raves created space for people to engage in the aesthetic practice of dancing on their own terms. The emphasis on movement rather than speech in the music, its tolerance and acceptance for "speaking in tongues", all create conditions where marginalised subjects can access forms of expression foreclosed in everyday life. As Anzaldua writes, "the dangers we face as women writers of color are not the same as those of white women though we have many in common. We don't have as much to lose—we never had any privileges". (Anzaldua, 1983, p. 165). Similarly, the rave has historically provided refuge precisely for those who "don't have as much to lose", namely the queer, trans, racialised bodies for whom normative public space was or still is hostile territory.

Collective experience in the rave, as analysed through these frameworks, involves the temporary dissolution of individual boundaries and the creation of what Foucault would call heterotopic spaces where normal social arrangements are suspended and reimaged (Bracken, 1984). It is simultaneously sensory (shared immersion in sound, light, movement), affective (shared emotional states of openness, connection, euphoria), and political (shared recognition of the space as refuge from hostile mainstream culture). These ideas highlight how, aesthetic experience, personal identity, and collective experience are deeply interconnected dimensions of human existence that mutually compliment one another, particularly in contexts like the rave where aesthetic form actively mediates between individual and collective dimensions.

More importantly, all of these ideas, which are only theories in practice so far, can be backed by research evidence. Empirical research on rave culture provides compelling evidence for how aesthetic experience functions as a mediator between individual identity and collective experience. Newson et al.'s (2021) study of 481 ravers demonstrates that engaging in what they term "the 4Ds" (dance, drums, sleep deprivation, and drugs) within

the ritualised environment of raves generates feelings of awe that lead to personally transformative experiences, which in turn produce “identity fusion,” a visceral form of social bonding where personal and group identities merge (Newson, 2025). Crucially, this process operates through aesthetic form: the repetitive beats (“drums”), the continuous dancing, and the sensory alterations produced by drugs and sleep deprivation create what the researchers identify as altered states of consciousness that facilitate what Turner called “liminality” - a withdrawal from normal modes of social action where ego dissolves and new perspectives emerge (Newson, 2025). The study found that this aesthetic-induced transformation was strongest when participants experienced awe, particularly through feelings of vastness, connectedness, and physical sensation, with dance and psychedelic drug use having the most significant effects (Newson, 2025). What makes this research particularly relevant to understanding mediation is its demonstration that these personally transformative experiences which are rooted in individual bodily sensations and altered consciousness, simultaneously produce collective bonds: participants who underwent awe-inspiring rave experiences exhibited significantly increased fusion with other ravers and demonstrated prosocial behaviour toward the rave community, even at personal cost (Newson, 2025). This empirical evidence supports the theoretical claims made by Lorde, Anzaldua, and others about how aesthetic experience rooted in embodied feeling can forge collective (political) consciousness. The rave space creates conditions where individual transformation and collective bonding occur simultaneously and interdependently, with each making the other possible and meaningful.

In conclusion, when we examine techno and rave culture through the frameworks provided by Adorno, Lorde, and Anzaldua, it is revealed that aesthetic experience does indeed function as a mediator between individual identity and collective experience. The rave creates conditions where individual boundaries become permeable, where personal sensation connects to collective meaning, where isolated subjects experience themselves as part of a larger social body. This mediation operates through specific formal qualities: the repetitive structure of techno music that induces trance states; the sensory immersion that overwhelms cognitive distance; the ritualistic practices that mark entry into transformed space and time; the darkness and anonymity that enable new forms of self-presentation. Following Adorno, we can understand aesthetic experience as revealing that the individual is always already social, and the social is always constituted through individual experience. The rave makes this dialectical relationship tangible: the individual body dancing alone is simultaneously part of a collective body moving together; the personal enjoyment of rhythmic entrainment is inseparable from the shared atmosphere created by hundreds of bodies breathing, sweating, and moving in synchronisation. Ultimately the rave’s capacity to create collective experiences where marginalised individuals feel safe, where capitalist temporality is suspended, where bodies connect through shared rhythm rather than verbal discourse, demonstrates that aesthetic experience can indeed mediate between individual identity and collective experience - not by transcending the tension between them but by creating spaces where that tension becomes generative rather than destructive.

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