

Fashion Institute of Technology

Searching for the “Third Space” on the Dance Floor

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## Abstract

One way that hybrid identities are formed is through nonverbal communication in nightlife spaces, particularly through dance to electronic dance music. The concept of hybrid identity was initially defined by theorist Homi K. Bhabha as spaces that exists between and beyond traditional boundaries and closely tied to the idea of “third space” - as an area where cultural interaction occurs<sup>1</sup>. Drawing from my own two decades long experience in these environments, as well as interviews with individuals who are either active participants or work within the scene, this study explores how electronic (in my case techno) music’s immersive, repetitive qualities and the embodied nature of dance allow individuals to navigate their sense of self beyond verbal expression. These spaces create opportunities for the convergence of different cultural influences, leading to the development of fluid, hybrid identities. This research examines how techno nightlife serves as a transformative space where traditional social and cultural boundaries blur. Within these spaces, participants can express, challenge, and reshape their identities, often experiencing a sense of belonging and personal reinvention. The process of identity formation is closely tied to the creation of a ‘third space’— a place where individuals negotiate new narratives of self that bridge gaps between cultures and challenge conventional social orders. By exploring the intersections of music, movement, and identity, this study contributes to the understanding of how techno culture fosters the emergence of new, nonverbal narratives of identity, offering insight into the role of nightlife spaces in the ongoing negotiation. Ultimately, it attempts to demonstrate how these nightlife spaces serve as fertile ground, offering insight into identity formation beyond verbal expression.

## Introduction

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<sup>1</sup> Bhabha, Homi K. *The location of culture*. Routledge, 2012. First published in 1994.

Migration often brings with its profound transformations in one's sense of self, language, and belonging. In my own experience, moving from Russia to the United States required me to renegotiate who I was and who I would become. The process of adapting to a new culture while maintaining ties to my Russian roots led to a sense of in-betweenness—a space where I was neither fully Russian nor fully American. I found myself suspended between two worlds, neither of which could fully accommodate the complexities of my identity. Language, as a primary mode of communication and self-expression, posed a significant challenge during this transition. Despite being a fully formed, educated individual in Russia, my ability to articulate myself in English was initially rudimentary. This linguistic barrier left me feeling alienated, as if I had been stripped of a key tool to connect with others in my new home.

Yet, it was within this gap—this absence of verbal articulation—that I found a sense of belonging in unexpected spaces. Nightclubs, especially those rooted in techno music, became my refuge. The non-lyrical, repetitive, and immersive nature of techno provided a form of communication that transcended language. I have to note that this research is specifically focused on techno due to my own personal experience and connection to it, but when I say techno, I also imply that any techno-adjacent hybrid genres fit too (such as bass, drum & bass, house, electro, etc). The dark, loud environment allowed me to connect with others on a nonverbal, almost primal level. Here, I didn't need to speak or understand spoken words; I could express myself through dance, through movement, through a shared experience with others who were similarly navigating their own personal narratives. In these spaces, I discovered a "third space"—a hybrid zone that existed between cultures, where language barriers dissolved, and a new sense of community could form. This third space wasn't bound by national identity or language; it was a place where I could simply be. The rhythm of the music replaced the need for words, and the

dance floor became a site of connection, where a collective identity emerged through the convergence of sound, movement, and shared experience.

The idea of this third space, as articulated in Bhabha's theory,<sup>2</sup> resonates with my own experiences and is echoed by those I've interviewed in the techno scene. This research draws on conversations with D, N and O - long-term participants and advocates of techno and techno adjacent night life culture and lifestyle. These individuals have each found their own forms of belonging and transformation within these spaces, illustrating the role of techno music as a medium of nonverbal communication and identity formation. Their narratives, along with my own experiences, serve as primary data in this study and reflect broader questions about hybrid identities in a globalized world.

This research also engages with theoretical frameworks that contextualize the techno scene as a liminal, transformative environment where nonverbal communication fosters a sense of identity that transcends cultural boundaries. Frith<sup>3</sup> explores the ways in which music facilitates identity construction by allowing individuals to experience a "collective self" through shared rhythms and communal practices, a concept particularly relevant in techno music. Frith<sup>4</sup> further emphasizes the unique power of non-lyrical music to open spaces for individual and collective meaning-making without the constraints of language, which directly connects to the techno scene's emphasis on sound and movement over verbal articulation.

Beyond music, the embodied experience of dance is a critical aspect of identity formation in these spaces. Fraleigh<sup>5</sup> delves into how dance and the body interact with soundscapes,

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<sup>2</sup> Bhabha, Homi K. *The location of culture*. Routledge, 2012. First published in 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Frith, Simon. "Music and identity." *Questions of cultural identity* 1.1 (1996): 108-128.

<sup>4</sup> Frith, Simon. "Words and Music: Why do songs have words?." *Lost in Music*. Routledge, 2016. 77-106.

<sup>5</sup> Fraleigh, Sondra. "How Things Fall Apart: Alteration of Body in Music and Dance." *Bodily Expression in Electronic Music*. Routledge, 2012. 35-52.

transforming physical and emotional states, which enables dancers to express and explore parts of themselves that may be inaccessible through words. Zebracki<sup>6</sup>, using autoethnographic approach, similarly discusses the techno dance floor as a space of “affective citizenship,” where identity and belonging are experienced through shared, embodied participation rather than traditional forms of communication. Gerard<sup>7</sup> further explores this in terms of ritual and liminality, where the role of DJs, dancers, and the collective movement within these scenes creates a transformative, almost ritualistic experience that fosters a unique form of connection and identity.

In line with these perspectives, Leavy<sup>8</sup> and Yazdiha<sup>9</sup> examine hybridity as a lens through which identity is understood as fluid and dynamic, rather than fixed within traditional categories. This idea of a “hybrid identity” captures the in-betweenness experienced by individuals who navigate multiple cultural backgrounds and who seek spaces to negotiate new narratives of belonging. Nightlife spaces, particularly techno clubs, offer a type of “third space” that accommodates these hybrid identities, providing a unique, communal setting where cultural and linguistic barriers dissolve, and individuals can simply exist and connect.

In this thesis, I will explore how hybrid identities are constructed and negotiated through nonverbal communication, particularly in the context of techno music and dance. By drawing on my own experiences and conducting ethnographic research in these nonverbal spaces, I seek to understand how these environments foster new narratives of belonging for individuals who, like

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<sup>6</sup> Zebracki, Martin. "Embodied techno-space: An auto-ethnography on affective citizenship in the techno electronic dance music scene." *Emotion, Space and Society* 20 (2016): 111-119.

<sup>7</sup> Gerard, Morgan. "Selecting ritual: DJs, dancers and liminality in underground dance music." *Rave culture and religion*. Routledge, 2004. 167-184.

<sup>8</sup> Leavy, Patricia. "An introduction to empirical examinations of hybridity." *Hybrid identities: Theoretical and empirical examinations* 12 (2008): 167.

<sup>9</sup> Yazdiha, Haj. "Conceptualizing hybridity: Deconstructing boundaries through the hybrid." (2010).

me, straddle multiple cultures. This study will investigate whether the absence of verbal interaction in techno scenes creates a unique platform for those searching for community and identity in a globalized world, offering a glimpse into how nonverbal communication becomes a powerful tool for bridging cultural divides.

For the purpose of my investigation, it is essential to clarify the key terms and concepts that support this study. The following section will provide a shared understanding of the ideas explored throughout.

### **Definition of Terms**

*The body*, as conceptualized by Elizabeth Grosz<sup>10</sup>, is not merely a physical entity or object; rather, it is the foundational "condition and context" for human interaction and meaning-making. It acts as an active medium through which individuals engage with their environment, communicate with others, and navigate the social world. The body is instrumental in shaping how we perceive and interact with objects, using gestures, expressions, and movements to both create and interpret meaning<sup>11</sup> This perspective challenges the notion of the body as passive, emphasizing instead its dynamic role in forming connections, exchanging information, and participating in cultural and social processes. In this way, the body is not just something we inhabit—it is an essential tool through which we experience and shape our realities.

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<sup>10</sup> Grosz, Elizabeth. "Psychoanalysis and the imaginary body." *Feminist Subjects, Multi-Media: Cultural Methodologies* (1995): 172-191.

<sup>11</sup> Fraleigh, Sondra. "How Things Fall Apart: Alteration of Body in Music and Dance." *Bodily Expression in Electronic Music*. Routledge, 2012. 35-52.

*Identity* can be defined as the set of characteristics, values, and affiliations that an individual uses to understand themselves and to be recognized by others. It encompasses both personal and social dimensions, shaped by factors like culture, language, beliefs, and interactions, and is dynamic, evolving over time through experiences and contexts.

*Hybrid Identity* refers to a fluid and dynamic sense of self that emerges from the blending of different cultural, linguistic, or social influences.<sup>12</sup> It allows individuals to navigate multiple identities, often existing in an "in-between" or "third space," where traditional boundaries of identity are challenged, and new, intersecting narratives of belonging and self-expression are created.

*Third Space* - is a concept developed by Homi K. Bhabha<sup>13</sup> that describes an in-between cultural space where identities and meanings are negotiated, allowing for the creation of new, hybrid identities. It's a space where traditional boundaries, such as nationality, language, or cultural norms, dissolve, enabling individuals to blend influences from multiple backgrounds. In the third space, people can redefine themselves outside of rigid cultural categories, fostering a sense of belonging that transcends singular identities.

*Nonverbal Communication* refers to the way individuals express and negotiate their identities without spoken language; in the case of my study - primarily through music, movement, and shared physical spaces in techno nightlife settings.<sup>14</sup> In these environments,

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<sup>12</sup> Leavy, Patricia. "An introduction to empirical examinations of hybridity." *Hybrid identities: Theoretical and empirical examinations* 12 (2008): 167.

<sup>13</sup> Bhabha, Homi K. *The location of culture*. Routledge, 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Zebracki, Martin. "Embodied techno-space: An auto-ethnography on affective citizenship in the techno electronic dance music scene." *Emotion, Space and Society* 20 (2016): 111-119.

nonverbal cues—such as rhythm, dance, body language, and the immersive soundscape of techno music—become powerful tools for self-expression and connection.

*Techno Music* - is a genre of electronic dance music characterized by repetitive beats, minimal or non-lyrical soundscapes, and immersive, hypnotic rhythms. Originating in Detroit in the 1980s primarily in Black Queer communities, techno emphasizes synthetic sounds, layering beats and loops to create a sense of meditative intensity.

*Night Club/Life Spaces* - are social environments, typically active during evening and nighttime hours, where people gather for music, dancing, and social interaction. In the context of techno music culture, these spaces are more than venues; they are immersive, transformative environments where individuals can temporarily escape daily routines and societal expectations.<sup>15</sup> The darkness, loud music, and collective energy allow participants to express themselves freely, often without words, through dance and nonverbal cues.

*Liminal Space* - in the context of techno music culture and nightlife are transitional, in-between spaces that exist outside of conventional boundaries.<sup>16</sup> These spaces blur distinctions—between day and night, self and other, and the mundane and the extraordinary—allowing participants (such as ravers and clubbers) to temporarily step outside of societal norms, identities, and routines. These spaces operate as "third spaces," facilitating identities shifts by allowing individuals to navigate between cultural, personal, and societal norms in ways unique to nightlife culture.

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<sup>15</sup> Gerard, Morgan. "Selecting ritual: DJs, dancers and liminality in underground dance music." *Rave culture and religion*. Routledge, 2004. 167-184.

<sup>16</sup> Gerard, Morgan. "Selecting ritual: DJs, dancers and liminality in underground dance music." *Rave culture and religion*. Routledge, 2004. 167-184.



*Dance* - is a form of nonverbal communication and self-expression that uses body movement to convey emotions, ideas, and identity. In the context of techno nightlife spaces, dance becomes a vital way for individuals to connect with others, embody the music, and explore facets of their identity beyond verbal language. Techno dance, often freeform and instinctual, allows participants to engage deeply with the music and with one another, fostering a communal experience. Within these spaces, dance transcends its physical form to become a transformative practice, enabling self-exploration and the exploration of new identities. Dance floor is charged with possibilities of becoming.<sup>17</sup>

*“Dance, therefore, is the primary conduit for liminal, transformative experience in the lives of ravers and clubbers. As a coordinated social action, dance transmits culture, encourages interconnectedness and reconfigures the body beyond the confines of the individual ego; as a liberatory, ecstatic experience of collective effervescence, it reveals new ways of being in the world, opens up the possibilities for transcending restrictive social categories and undoubtedly offers numerous health benefits from the spiritual to the physical.”*<sup>18</sup>

### **Methodology and Study Design**

This study draws upon three in-depth interviews with participants from the techno and nightlife scene: D, N, and O. Each individual was selected for their unique and significant engagement with the community. D is in his early 40s, a scholar, active DJ and producer who has worked in nightlife for over two decades and organized numerous shows as well as the festivals. He is also a front man in a punk rock band that after a long hiatus is back to performing and

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<sup>17</sup> St John, Graham. "The difference engine: Liberation and the rave imaginary." Rave culture and religion. Routledge, 2004. 19-45.

<sup>18</sup> Gerard, 2004.

writing new music as of last year. D offered insights into the performative and professional aspects of the culture. N, a queer individual, in his mid-40s who moved to New York from Brazil as a young adult, provides a perspective shaped by both personal and cultural adaptation. O, an Irish-French researcher in his early 30s, contributes a unique lens as someone relatively new to the city yet deeply immersed in its nightlife through his inquisitive nature and artistic engagement. Together, these three informants form a multifaceted view of how techno spaces function as sites of identity formation and cultural exchange.

N's experiences are particularly significant for understanding the intersections of identity, community, and adaptation. As someone assigned male at birth and navigating queer spaces, his journey to finding queer-centric techno communities highlights the importance of inclusivity in nightlife. His intellectual curiosity, reflected in his passion for philosophy and conceptual thinking, shapes how he interacts with these spaces. For N, the dancefloor is more than a site of leisure; it is a dynamic arena for exploration and connection, whether through solitary reflection or shared moments with others. O brings a contrasting perspective, having lived in New York for about four years. As a researcher and data sculptor, he approaches the techno scene with an analytical mind, balancing this with his expressive abilities as a dancer. His experiences bridge the gap between scientific inquiry and embodied participation.

To preserve privacy and align with ethical research practices, participants are referred to by single letters (D, N, O). This approach reflects the ethos of the community, which often emphasizes trust, discretion, and personal freedom. It also ensures participants feel comfortable sharing sensitive aspects of their experiences without fear of judgment or exposure. Using letters shifts the focus away from individual identities and toward the broader themes and collective

narratives that underpin this examination. The interviews, conducted in semi-structured formats in relaxing settings of local coffee shops, encouraged open dialogue, allowing participants to articulate their personal narratives and perspectives in their own words.

Interviews were conducted in person and recorded with the consent of the participants. Each conversation lasted between 30 and 42 minutes. All of them were conducted in three different coffee shops around Bushwick, Brooklyn. The analysis of these interviews is phenomenological, aiming to interpret the lived experiences of the participants within the context of contemporary theories on hybridity and cultural identity. The goal of phenomenology is to enlarge and deepen understanding of the range of immediate experiences.<sup>19</sup> This allowed the study to prioritize their interpretations of the techno scene and its influence on identity formation and communication practices. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed thematically. This qualitative approach provided the depth allowing to zoom in on few particular life experiences providing a nuanced understanding rather than definitive conclusions.

The interview questions were crafted to delve into the participants' experiences of navigating identity, culture, and self-expression within the context of techno nightlife spaces. These inquiries explored the sense of belonging participants felt upon moving to a new country and how this evolved over time. Key questions investigated how nightlife spaces facilitated opportunities for being and for exploring new narratives, and whether the role of verbal language shifted or diminished as they transitioned from their culture of origin to a new one. The interviews also focused on how nonverbal communication through non-lyrical techno music shaped their self-understanding and identity.

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<sup>19</sup> Spiegelberg, EI, ed. *The phenomenological movement: A historical introduction*. Vol. 5. Springer Science & Business Media, 2012.

Participants were asked to reflect on the unique space that the repetitive, non-lyrical nature of techno provides for introspection and self-discovery, as well as the role of repetitive movement, tactile expression, and dance in fostering self-reflection and connection. Additional questions examined whether these nonverbal practices enhanced verbal communication and how they contributed to the construction of new cultural identities. These open-ended and reflective prompts aimed to uncover the intricate interplay between personal transformation and the collective practices of techno culture.

The fact that interviews were conducted in informal setting of coffee shops facilitated a conversational dynamic and encouraged participants to share openly. This setting also allowed for my active participation in the discussion, fostering a more collaborative exchange of ideas. As a researcher who is deeply embedded in the techno nightlife scene, my own experiences naturally informed the dialogue, creating a space where participants could relate their narratives to someone familiar with the cultural and emotional nuances of the community. This approach aligns with my broader methodological framework, which combines the participants' experiences with autoethnography - drawing on my own lived experiences and insights, as well as the observations of others within the scene who have faced similar trials of cultural adaptation and identity exploration.

To ensure accuracy and depth in analysis, I recorded, transcribed, and meticulously reviewed each interview. This process allowed me to identify recurring themes and patterns, both within the participants' accounts and in relation to my own reflections. By intertwining these perspectives, the methodology not only highlights the individual voices of the participants but

also situates their experiences within a larger, collective narrative of the techno community as a space for self-expression, belonging, and cultural reimagining.

## Results and Discussion

This study explores how hybrid identities emerge by bridging cultural gaps through nonverbal communication practices, specifically within the techno music and dance scene. The central research question - *How do hybrid identities emerge, bridging gaps between cultures in the search for a third space, and how does the practice of nonverbal communication converge to create new narratives through exploration of techno music and dance?* - was explored through interviews with participants D, N, and O, my own experiences in the nightlife scene, alongside drawing on the existing body of literature on the topic. The following sections present the key themes that emerged from my explorations and the data.

### PRACTICE OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

The practice of nonverbal communication emerged as a central theme in understanding how techno music and dance facilitate identity transformation. These practices set the stage for examining the deeper cultural dynamics at play within nightlife spaces. In particular, music plays a pivotal role that can shape collective experiences and within the nightlife scene.

*Music as an Embodiment of Social Orders.* Music operates as a powerful medium within nightlife spaces, shaping individual and collective experiences while reflecting and reimagining social dynamics. In the context of techno, its unique characteristics - non-lyrical composition, repetitive structures, and immersive rhythms - offer a canvas for exploring identity, community,

and other-than-day-life hierarchies. To maintain clarity and conciseness, I will use the term *techno* throughout this discussion to refer broadly to electronic dance music that encompasses techno or closely related subgenres. This approach recognizes the diversity within the genre while aligning with the specific focus of this study.

By being a main backdrop in nightlife spaces music animates imagined communities. Techno fosters a shared sense of belonging among its participants, even those from vastly different cultural backgrounds. Simultaneously, it can establish new hierarchies, subtly redefining social orders through the interplay of sound, space, and participation. Central to this is the deliberate absence of lyrics, which opens a space for personal interpretation and self-reflection, allowing listeners to navigate their own narratives. The following sections explore these dimensions, revealing how techno music transcends mere entertainment to become a transformative force in the creation of hybrid identities.

The first concept, music as an embodiment of social orders, highlights how techno, as a musical genre, provides a space for individuals to construct and experience imagined communities. This idea is brought to life in the work of Georgina Born that centers around digital music and its relational and social forms.<sup>20</sup> My own experience of the dance floor as a kind of home with its ability to connect people without words reflects the unique way music fosters belonging beyond geographical or linguistic boundaries. For me, techno serves as a medium where identity is not fixed but can be dynamically created and reshaped through shared experiences. On the dance floor, words lose their importance, one struggles to talk, because music is so loud, and it is on purpose, people are discouraged from socializing - it's more about

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<sup>20</sup> Born, Georgina. "Digital music, relational ontologies and social forms." *Bodily Expression in Electronic Music*. Routledge, 2012. 173-190.

the collective energy, the connection through eye contact, body language, and the shared rhythm. This space, free from linguistic barriers, allows for the creation of a community that is imagined not through language or cultural boundaries but through the collective, embodied experience of the music.

According to N, music holds the power to establish and animate social connections that transcend spoken language, especially in new environments where linguistic barriers exist. In his experience moving from Brazil to the US and adapting, being in a place where you don't speak the local language allows body language and the rhythm of techno music to become a dominant form of expression. In these moments, music becomes a form of "symbolic language," as it connects individuals on a non-verbal level, allowing them to communicate through shared experience and embodied rhythm rather than traditional speech. "Since you don't know the language of the new place, any body language takes precedence. It's a way to communicate... symbolic language... a lot of languages."<sup>21</sup> To further illustrate the point, D describes electronic music as an immersive and multi-sensory experience, where sound systems, abstract music, and lighting create an environment far removed from mundane, regular day life or commercial spaces. This separation fosters a sense of collective participation in something "tribal," connecting individuals without the need for words. "It creates this, like, multi-sensory fog, light, darkness, full sound, crazy, abstract music...you're participating in something far away from like, yeah, like, you're not in a fucking Kmart."<sup>22</sup> Based on my own experience instrumental and non-lyrical techno music encourages introspection and helps engage with my own thoughts and

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<sup>21</sup> N. Interview with the author. Variety Café, Brooklyn, New York, September 2024.

<sup>22</sup> D. Interview with the author. Topos Book Store and Café, Ridgewood, New York, September 2024

emotions without external distractions. The communal and personal aspects intertwine, animating a shared yet individual experience.

Techno also holds the power to establish new hierarchies within the shared space of the dance floor. Nonverbal communication through techno extends beyond creating shared spaces to shaping new social dynamics that transcend traditional power structures. On the dance floor, presence and shared bodily movement take precedence over status or identity, emphasizing participation and connection. Techno fosters an egalitarian dynamic where social order is defined by collective energy and interaction with the music, rather than by socio-cultural hierarchies such as race, class, or nationality<sup>23</sup>. In this way, the dance floor becomes a space where new hierarchies are formed—ones rooted in shared experience and communal unity rather than individual distinctions. Techno, as a genre, offers a space where new hierarchies can emerge, especially in contrast to previous music scenes. N describes a shift in New York's techno scene: "Techno became better and packed, like the same faces the way that I like."<sup>24</sup> O's statement, "I don't belong in the United States... I belong in New York City, but I really belong in my little (techno) family now,"<sup>25</sup> reflects the sense of belonging that transcends geographic and national identities, aligning with the idea that nightlife culture can foster new social hierarchies within the dance floor. While O feels a broader sense of connection to New York City, it is within a more specific "little family" that they find true belonging—a smaller, yet deeply significant community.

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<sup>23</sup> Goulding, Christina, Avi Shankar, and Richard Elliott. "Working weeks, rave weekends: identity fragmentation and the emergence of new communities." *Consumption, Markets and Culture* 5.4 (2002): 261-284.

<sup>24</sup> N. Interview with the author.

<sup>25</sup> O. Interview with the author. SEY Coffee, Brooklyn, New York, September 2024



Though techno music has a power of shaping new forms of belonging, the emptiness in its non-lyrical nature deepens this experience. Without lyrics, the space between beats invites introspection, allowing individuals to project their own emotions and interpretations, enriching the collective expression on the dance floor. Abstract, non-lyrical music offers a space for contemplation, allowing the space to connect with one's own thoughts. This type of music creates an environment where listeners can immerse themselves in their inner world and feel their own way. D elaborates on the spaciousness of electronic music: "The longer a piece of music, the less you put in it...otherwise it just becomes fatiguing. The average track length is seven minutes, twice as long as a pop song, so you need space for the material to breathe."<sup>26</sup> This minimalism offers a meditative quality that allows listeners to engage deeply with their own psyche.

*Dance as a practice of self-expression and communication with others.* As much as music shapes social dynamics, we should not discount another powerful element in night life spaces – dance. Practice of dancing further enhances nonverbal communications, serving as a powerful practice of self-expression and interaction with others on the dance floor. Dance facilitates a form of connection that transcends the verbal, enabling participants to communicate emotions, solidarity, and mutual understanding through shared movement. This makes the dance floor not just a space for self-expression, but a platform for nonverbal dialogue and bonding. As Elizabeth Grosz theorizes in her work on imaginary body, the body is not just a passive vessel but an active medium through which individuals engage with their environment, communicate, and make meaning<sup>27</sup>. In nightlife spaces, the body becomes instrumental in shaping how we interact with

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<sup>26</sup> D. Interview with the author.

<sup>27</sup> Grosz, Elizabeth. "Psychoanalysis and the imaginary body." *Feminist Subjects, Multi-Media: Cultural Methodologies* (1995): 172-191.

the music and others, as movement, gestures, and expressions create a dynamic connection between self and community. This perspective challenges traditional views of the body as an object, highlighting its centrality in forming relationships and negotiating identity.

Dance, as a form of nonverbal communication, is key to this process, offering a space for individuals to embody the music and explore facets of their identity beyond the limits of verbal language. In the context of techno nightlife, dance is often freeform and instinctual, providing a conduit for deeper engagement with the music and fellow dancers. As St John suggests, the dance floor becomes a space of possibility, where the act of dancing enables transformative self-exploration and the negotiation of new identities<sup>28</sup>. This practice is not simply about physical movement; it is a way to engage with the collective energy, offering an opportunity to transcend individual ego and embrace a communal experience. It can help to reveal new ways of being and open up new possibilities for selfhood and social connection<sup>29</sup>. These sentiments are echoed by O when he describes his progressive growth through practice of learning how to exist on a dancefloor: "Learning to dance harder and being seen—it's like overcoming this fear of being seen. Now I can dance anywhere, and it gave me confidence to talk to anybody."<sup>30</sup>

*Immersive nature of night life spaces as a refuge for finding a sense of belonging.* Music and dance are dynamic matters that are being practiced in night clubs, but the spaces that provide a stage where they can be played out are important as well. Techno spaces function as liminal environments - transitional zones that exist outside conventional social structures and cultural

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<sup>28</sup> St John, Graham. "The difference engine: Liberation and the rave imaginary." *Rave culture and religion*. Routledge, 2004. 19-45.

<sup>29</sup> Gerard, Morgan. "Selecting ritual: DJs, dancers and liminality in underground dance music." *Rave culture and religion*. Routledge, 2004. 167-184.

<sup>30</sup> O. Interview with the author.

norms. Liminality in the context of techno music and nightlife refers to spaces that blur the distinctions between day and night, self and other, and the ordinary and the extraordinary.<sup>31</sup> These "in-between" spaces offer participants the opportunity to momentarily step outside of societal expectations, embracing a sense of freedom that is central to the night club dancer experience.

These spaces can be understood as "third spaces," where individuals can explore and reshape their identities by navigating between cultural, personal, and societal norms in ways that are distinct to nightlife culture. In these liminal spaces, the rigid boundaries of identity are softened, allowing for fluidity and transformation. The techno environment, through its immersive qualities, becomes a refuge—a space that fosters a sense of belonging not tied to traditional markers of identity but to the collective experience of being "in-between," where social roles are temporarily suspended and new possibilities for self-exploration are created. These spaces become places where individuals, especially migrants or those feeling disconnected, can come together in shared experiences of music and movement. N explained that in Brazil, community was a default — you always knew where to find others.<sup>32</sup> In the US, however, he had to actively seek out these spaces. Nightlife spaces became that sanctuary, a location where community emerged not just through physical presence but through shared rituals of dance and listening. D describes clubs as spaces where people can "tap in" and find a sense of belonging, comparing them to community spaces like churches or AA meetings.<sup>33</sup> The enveloping sound, physical sensations of bass, and concealing smoke create an environment where identities can blur and participants feel safe exploring who they are. My personal journey

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<sup>31</sup> Gerard, Morgan, 2004.

<sup>32</sup> N. Interview with the author.

<sup>33</sup> D. Interview with the author.

further advocates this argument. Nightlife spaces became a refuge for me when I was searching for my sense of belonging upon changing continents when I moved to the US. They did and continue offering me a non-judgmental setting, where the absence of overt expectations allows for a collective experience of connection and belonging. I can exercise the steps of my personal journey, while these spaces permit for a continuous process of self-discovery and affirmation. Night club becomes a sanctuary where identity is not dictated by societal norms but could be explored and supported by the environment and its participants.

The practice of nonverbal communication in nightlife spaces, particularly through techno music and dance, reveals the profound ways in which these elements facilitate the expression and negotiation of identity. Techno music, with its ability to animate imagined communities and establish new social hierarchies, serves as both a unifying force and a vehicle for introspection. The emptiness and space found in non-lyrical electronic music encourages deep self-reflection, while the dancefloor acts as a space for individual expression and connection with others. Together, these practices create an immersive environment where belonging is actively cultivated, offering a refuge for those seeking a sense of community and personal freedom.

#### CREATING NEW NARRATIVES OF IDENTITIES

The next chapter explores how engaging with techno music and dance within confines of nightlife spaces contribute to the creation of new narratives of identity. In the dynamic environment of night clubs, individuals not only express themselves but also reconstruct and negotiate their identities through immersive interactions and shared experiences. The following section will delve into how the fusion of sound, movement, and space allows for the emergence

of hybrid identities, challenging traditional boundaries and opening possibilities for reimagining existing cultural structures.

*Existing identity and potential reasons for transformation.* To further understand how nightlife spaces can be instrumental in shaping new identities, it is useful to look at the interplay between existing identity and its potential for transformation. Inquisitive exploration in this direction can help to examine the factors that influence one's sense of self and the motivations behind seeking a change in identity, particularly through techno music and dance.

Nightlife spaces were crucial for my own development as a person. I spent a considerable amount of time pondering on my own experiences of disconnection from my homeland on the dance floor. Returning to Russia for the first time after being gone for 8 years, I felt like a "tourist in my own country," which highlighted the fluidity of identity and the search for spaces where I could reconcile these feelings. Nightlife, my continuous desire to come back to it, provided a refuge where I could explore and redefine my identity. Away from day light, anxiety, turbulence, and struggles of becoming American, I was able to put everything on pause and just be an actor in phantasmagorical spectacle of dancefloor. Those pauses were instrumental in helping me to color my otherwise mostly grey existence of my first years as an immigrant. D, as a musician, adds his alternative insight into electronic music's ability to envelop and "hold" individuals: "Music offers a place to go that envelops you in waves of sound...allowing you to explore internally, feel your identity blur, and get out of your box."<sup>34</sup> It underscores the transformative potential of these spaces that offer a space where personal identity can be reshaped beyond the limitations of traditional labels.

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<sup>34</sup> D. Interview with the author.

In the process of entering a new cultural space, whether it is a new country or a new community, identity is both challenged and reshaped. The transformation often involves discarding parts of one's previous self to make room for new experiences, yet not everything from the new culture is adopted. Instead, individuals selectively choose elements that resonate with them, constructing a more authentic and fitting identity.<sup>35</sup> This process reflects the fluidity of identity, where elements of the past and present are continually sifted through to form a cohesive narrative that aligns with one's evolving sense of self.

*Transition or becoming – bridging a gap.* If we accept the idea of identity as fluid and constantly evolving, the next phase in this transformation would involve the act of bridging the gap between past and present selves. This process of becoming is marked by navigating new cultural spaces, where the synthesis of old and new identities is not only necessary but empowering. The nightlife and techno scene, as spaces where verbal communication takes a backseat, could offer a unique opportunity to bridge these gaps through shared nonverbal practices. These spaces foster a sense of belonging and acceptance also due to egalitarian nature of it.<sup>36</sup>

The process of transitioning into a new identity is not solely intellectual but is also embodied through actions and self-presentation<sup>37</sup>. Small details, such as clothing, posture, and gestures, gradually become part of how individuals express and define themselves. The process of "becoming" involves bridging cultural gaps and finding the elements of a new that resonate with one's existing identity. This process of self-expression allows for the invitation of one's true

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<sup>35</sup> Crawford, Troy, et al. "Hybrid identity in academic writing: Are there two of me? ." Profile Issues in Teachers Professional Development 16.2 (2014): 87-100.

<sup>36</sup> Goulding, Christina, Avi Shankar, and Richard Elliott. "Working weeks, rave weekends: identity fragmentation and the emergence of new communities." Consumption, Markets and Culture 5.4 (2002): 261-284.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

self, with nonverbal communication through appearance and behavior facilitating a deeper connection to this emerging identity<sup>38</sup>. In parallel, the immersive nature of electronic music further blurs the boundaries of identity, offering an environment where individuals can step outside rigid structures and explore the fluidity of who they can become. These dynamic fosters a space for identity to be continuously reshaped and experienced in new, liberating ways.

*Solidifying and embodying new narratives of identity - finding a third space.* The final step in the process of adapting new identity is to embody new narrative fully. As individuals move through cultural spaces, they do not only experiment with new identities but begin to integrate them into their lived experience, creating a more cohesive sense of self. This transformation often takes place in what can be described as a "third space" - an environment where conventional social roles and cultural norms are suspended, allowing for the freedom to fully embody new forms of identity.<sup>39</sup> In such a space, individuals can reconcile their multiple selves and craft narratives that are more authentic, fluid, and reflective of their evolving experiences.

The sense of belonging in nightlife spaces is central to the interviewees' narratives, with dancing and nonverbal communication helping them solidify new identities free from their original cultural constraints. This "third space" allowed them to express themselves authentically and feel part of a community, fostering personal growth. The immersive quality of these spaces - lights, sounds, and communal energy - further reinforces these new narratives, making them deeply felt and enduring. As I am bridging the gap between my Russian heritage and American experience practically every day, understanding that identity doesn't just creates itself but rather

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<sup>38</sup> Fraleigh, Sondra. "How Things Fall Apart: Alteration of Body in Music and Dance." *Bodily Expression in Electronic Music*. Routledge, 2012. 35-52.

<sup>39</sup> Yazdihaj, Haj. "Conceptualizing hybridity: Deconstructing boundaries through the hybrid." (2010).

is co-constructed through interactions and validation from others is something that I think about often. More often than not I think about it on a dancefloor. D through his experience highlights how electronic music and nightlife create a space where identity becomes fluid and malleable, encouraging exploration and transformation.<sup>40</sup> For participants like O and N, who both moved to the US from France and Brazil respectively, techno nightlife dissolves cultural divides, creating a shared space where new forms of identity are celebrated. These spaces become microcosms of a utopian society, where hybrid identities are not only accepted but also embraced. According to Simon Frith whose ideas are echoed by N's practical dance floor experience, music (techno) facilitates the embodiment of new identities, which extends beyond the dancefloor, influencing other aspects of life.<sup>41</sup> I would also add, based on what I have observed over two decades of being present in a scene in various capacities, that the process of finding a third space is often cyclical, with participants returning time and again to refine and deepen their self-understanding.

Combined, these perspectives underscore the power of nightlife spaces to solidify and embody new narratives of identity that can offer a transformative environment where individuals can continuously evolve and express their hybrid selves.

## **Conclusion**

The process of adapting to a new culture (which me, N, and O all went through by moving to the US) often involves grappling with language barriers, which can create a sense of alienation. However, in spaces like techno clubs, where verbal communication takes a backseat,

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<sup>40</sup> D. Interview with the author.

<sup>41</sup> Frith, Simon. "Music and identity." *Questions of cultural identity* 1.1 (1996): 108-128.



this challenge is alleviated. The absence of a strong linguistic focus allows individuals to bridge the gap through nonverbal means, fostering a space where new identities can be built.

Nightlife spaces enhance this transformative process by acting as immersive environments where participants enter a liminal state. These spaces are detached from the norms and structures of the outside world, offering a safe and inclusive atmosphere for experimentation and personal evolution. Through dancing and nonverbal connection with others, individuals transition from familiar aspects of their identity toward new, uncharted territories. This transition is supported by the communal energy of the space, fostering a sense of collective rhythm that empowers individual exploration and growth.

In these environments, the process of selective transformation takes place more fluidly, as individuals draw from both their past and present experiences to craft an identity that is uniquely their own, free from the constraints of traditional labels. As Simon Frith concludes his essay on Music and Identity:

*“what makes music special – what makes music special for identity – is that it defines a space without boundaries (a game without frontiers). Music is thus the cultural form best able both to cross borders – sounds carry across fences and walls and oceans, across classes, races, and nations – and to define places; in clubs, scenes, and raves, listening on headphones, radio and in the concert hall, we are only where the music takes us.”<sup>42</sup>*

By focusing on nonverbal communication as a central practice in these spaces, this research hopes to demonstrate how individuals can move beyond verbal frameworks to

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<sup>42</sup> Frith, Simon. "Music and identity." Questions of cultural identity 1.1 (1996): 108-128.

reconstruct their identities in ways that are deeply personal and profoundly communal. Techno music and dance, with their repetitive and meditative qualities, act as powerful tools in this journey, enabling participants to reconcile fragmented aspects of their identity and find a deeper sense of belonging. The study aspires to highlight how these practices contribute to the formation of hybrid identities, offering insights into the transformative potential of nonverbal communication in shaping who we are.

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