

Taking raving seriously. Intervista a McKenzie Wark

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La sezione TrasformAzioni di questo numero ospita un contributo peculiare: un'intervista a McKenzie Wark, che abbiamo avuto il piacere di incontrare durante la XIII edizione del Festival Electropark a Genova.

McKenzie Wark è una studiosa e scrittrice, docente di media e cultural studies presso la New School for Social Research a New York. È nota per i suoi lavori su teoria dei media, tecnologia e teoria critica. Alcuni dei suoi libri più importanti includono "A Hacker Manifesto" (2004), "Gamer Theory" (2007) e "Molecular Red" (2015), che esplorano le intersezioni tra media, politica e cultura.

Negli ultimi anni, McKenzie Wark ha concentrato la sua riflessione attorno alla scena queer e trans dei rave a New York, pubblicando il testo "Raving" (2023), e optando per una pratica di scrittura che ha scelto di descrivere

"con parole derise e ridicolizzate: autofiction e autotheory, perché rappresentano nella letteratura quello che noi trans e frocie rappresentiamo nel genere: qualcosa da non prendere troppo sul serio. Dalla scrittura autofinziale, alla scrittura autoteorica dei concetti. Ma sotto la condizione generale che l'auto che scrive non quadri mai" (2023:108).

Temi e pratiche di scrittura che ci sono parse perfettamente aderenti agli scopi e agli obiettivi della sezione TrasformAzioni, con un valore aggiunto dato dalla cornice che ha permesso l'incontro: la XIII edizione del Festival Electropark, dal titolo "Resonances". Sono le parole dell'organizzazione a fornirci i dati di contesto per poter situare il contributo:

"RESONANCES dà spazio a pratiche collettive e collaborative, nella consapevolezza che le varie emergenze che il pianeta ha attraversato negli ultimi anni - politiche, ecologiche, pandemiche, umanitarie, economiche, sociali (...) - mettono l'umanità di fronte all'urgenza di prendersi cura del mondo e degli altri esseri, umani e non umani, di instaurare relazioni profonde, di immaginare futuri possibili attraverso azioni che possano risuonare [trad. nostra]".

Diversi i punti toccati nell'intervista: il rapporto tra queer studies e trans studies, quello tra movimenti e sapere accademico e, naturalmente, la scena queer e trans dei rave di New York e l'urgenza che questi spazi vengano interrogati e attraversati "prendendoli sul serio". Speriamo, dunque, che il contributo che qui pubblichiamo possa "risuonare" anche a chi lo leggerà e che possa essere occasione e spunto per nuove riflessioni e per nuovi scambi. Buona lettura!

English Version

Taking raving seriously.

Interview with McKenzie Wark¹

The TransformAzioni section of this issue features a unique contribution: an interview with McKenzie Wark, whom we had the pleasure of meeting during the XIII edition of the Electropark Festival in Genoa. McKenzie Wark is a scholar and writer, teaching media and cultural studies at the New School for Social Research in New York. She is known for her work on media theory, technology, and critical theory. Some of her most important books include *A Hacker Manifesto* (2004), *Gamer Theory* (2007), and *Molecular Red* (2015), which explore the intersections of media, politics, and culture.

In recent years, McKenzie Wark has focused her reflections on the queer and trans rave scene in New York, publishing the text *Raving* (2023), and opting for a writing practice she describes as:

"I choose terms for this writing, this practice, that are derided and ridiculed-autofiction and autotheory, as they are to genre what we transnians and faggots are to gender: not to be taken too seriously. From the autofictional writing of perceptions, then, to an autotheoretical writing of concepts. But with the general proviso that the auto that writes doesn't add up (2023:58)".

The themes and writing practices she discusses seem perfectly aligned with the aims and objectives of the TransformAzioni section, with added value given by the context that allowed for this meeting: the XIII edition of the Electropark Festival, titled "Resonances". The words of the organization provide the contextual data needed to situate this contribution:

"RESONANCES gives space to collective and collaborative practices, in the awareness that the various emergencies the planet has been going through in recent years - political, ecological, pandemic, humanitarian, economic, social (...) - confront humanity with the urgency of caring for the world and for other human and non-human beings, of entering into profound relationships, of imagining possible futures through actions that can resonate".

Several points were addressed in the interview: the relationship between queer studies and trans studies, the relationship between movements and academic knowledge, and, of course, the queer and trans rave scene in New York and the urgency of interrogating and traversing these spaces "seriously". We hope that the contribution we publish here can also "resonate" with those who read it and inspire new reflections and exchanges. Happy reading!

¹ The interview is published without editorial intervention. We chose to preserve its spoken form, retaining the characteristics of oral language rather than adapting it to written style.

Mariella Popolla

So, the first question is about, in your opinion, from your point of view, what's the state of art of queer studies?

McKenzie Wark

Ah, how long have you got?

Mariella Popolla

This is the simplest question.

McKenzie Wark

Long story short, and I comment that, as a person who was looking for resources to come out as a trans woman, and queer studies was a place that I looked for that, in the 90s, but queer theory in particular wasn't helpful for that, and I think we've come to the point of figuring out that queer studies and trans studies are related but different, and the difference, the thing about things becoming different is, sometimes, they become hierarchical or antagonistic. We don't really need to do that, that's really not helpful, but we need a little space to do trans studies as a different thing, for two reasons. In terms of empirical objects of study, a lot of what got read as queer history is also readable as trans history, and it doesn't have to be either or, it's more interesting that it's both.

So, with these scene or these artists, were they queer or were they trans? Yes, the answer is yes, it's both, but it's helpful to have those two perspectives.

And then, conceptually, queer theory tended to treat, particularly trans femininity, as an allegorical double for homosexuality rather than as its own thing, and was super interested in drag, for example. Great, I love drag, but I'm not a drag queen, so there was a way in which queer theory was also been valuing fluid and evanescent and spectacular and particularly challenging forms of gender expression, and that's all also fine, but trans people have to survive walking down the street, and so, sometimes, being incredibly ordinary is very important; so, sometimes, we're going to do very, very normie gender presentation in the interest of survival on several levels, so there's too much pressure to be challenging gender all the time when your survival's at stake, so I think there's, it's time to disaggregate and push back a little bit on some of the things that queer studies had started work on, but now we have to do things a little differently.

Mariella Popolla

Thank you! It came to my mind, when you were talking about the performative aspects of queer theory and the need to survive of trans people, that what we have been noticing lately has been a shift from a cultural approach to a more materialist approach. What do you think about this? Have you noticed this or it's something that's happening more here, in Italy or maybe in Europe, because it just shifted...We had a lot of studies that were so cultural, they had a really, really pure cultural approach, and then we have a lot of queer studies that keep coming to the surface right now that are more into Gramscian approach or Marxism, and it's more anti-capitalistic inherently, right?

McKenzie Wark

If you center the material existence of trans people, and I'm going to focus a bit on trans women, because I am one, but it's not to deny the significance of other, the experience of trans men and non-binary people, it's just that, even within it, there's a piece that I know better than others, but if you center the lives of trans women, they're usually incredibly hard... Mine wasn't. I stayed in the closet forever because I could see what it was going to be survival sex work and

then getting caught up in the prison industrial system and mass incarceration and housing insecurity and some mental health struggles and the frighteningly high suicide rate that trans people have... so you start to look at those things a little bit and think about on how, then not all those things are uniquely trans experiences, there are racialized populations who also get caught up in policing and mass incarceration. So where are the connections? A lot of trans women do sex work. They're not the only ones doing sex work, so how are those, a set of connective experiences around political economy, who are the, all labor is exploited, but then some labor is super exploited, and how does capitalism depend on having an exploitable labor force and also a super exploitable one that's even beneath that? So to start asking those sorts of questions.

I can say a little bit about trans masculinity. If you read a book, *Stone Butch Blues* by Leslie Feinberg, which is the classic about struggles around the border between butch lesbians and trans masculinity, it has a lot to say about that, but a lot of the book is about labor, and the main character is doing all these working class jobs, because, regardless of where these characters fell on that spectrum from butchness to trans masculinity, they're all doing this working class labor that went away; post-industrialization destroyed those work opportunities. So there's a political economy of the spaces available to trans people, and it's different, but I think it's important to start paying attention to that.

And I mentioned Leslie Feinberg because that book is from the 90s. We've already, we've got people we can read about on how are those things we could pay attention to.

Mariella Popolla

That's interesting. Can I add one more question? Because when you said that, that there are some works that are more subjected to exploitation.

Here, for example, in Italy, we have a strong opposition between two feminist views, perceived as the one that is supportive of sex workers and the one that is against sex work. And what we feel is that it's really hard for us, for example, when we talk about sex work, we feel we always have to defend sex work, and we cannot ever go deeper and deeper in what is the exploitation that is present *also* in sex work. Because we feel that if we talk about exploitation in sex work, we are automatically perceived as going against sex workers.

And so we lose this more materialistic approach, something that is organizational, economical, and so we feel a lot of self-inflicted pressure to avoid talking about those aspects, because we don't want anyone to feel like we are going against them.

McKenzie Wark

It's, there's some nuance to it. My immediate community in New York is trans women, half of them do or have done sex work, because there's just not a lot of other work. But some people actually would rather do that work than other things. It's : you just made a thousand dollars in a night, so your rent's paid. But some people really would not do it at all, and find it emotionally very difficult. And of course, for a lot of people, it's physically dangerous. So this is not ideal labor. And a lot of people are doing it for survival and not by choice. Its illegality complicates that, because it means, then, not only you are dealing with the dangers of clients, you're dealing with the dangers of police. The police are not our friend, and never are.

So, that's not the solution. So what would, and it's not my lane, because I don't do sex work, but to pay attention to people who want to organize it, and who want the conditions under which that work is conducted to be equitable and safe where possible. But the other side of it is, what other labor is available for some categories of usually feminized people?

What's the alternative to doing it? There's a whole set of questions. And for trans women, if you don't do sex work, so what are you going to do?

Right, then you're going to work a nightlife. It's not really any better. And that's borderline illegal as... Or are you going to work in fashion? Fashion sucks as an industry. The working conditions can be worse than sex work!

So, maybe, part of it is not always separating sex work out, but thinking of it in terms of what are the other kinds of labor that are around that certain populations, super exploited populations, get pushed into.

Mariella Popolla

Oh, thank you. Okay, so another question that we'd like to ask you is about the connection and the nurturing between activism and movement and academia, somehow. So we feel that in our case, it's a strong connection, and we feel we are, all of us, most activists, so we feel it and embody it.

But in some way, we feel that they are always nurturing each other. So what do you think about this connection? Because you told us about other kinds of connection between, for example, transmasculine and butch, and so on.

So we'd like to ask you this question.

McKenzie Wark

That's also... how long will we talk about this, all day? And I think that one's going to vary a lot, as all these things do, but that one particularly between different institutional contexts. I work in a private university in the United States that's very tuition-demanded, so it's very different teaching in state-run institutions, where they're usually not free anymore, but where they're cheaper.

So those things change it. I think there's...ways that movement learning and knowledge and academic criteria for knowledge have a useful tension, that they're different is actually helpful. There's just protocols by which you demonstrate something is logical or true or interesting in an academic context, and it's different.

And I think it's good to have a little bit of breathing room between that and the knowledge that movements produce, which tend not to have the same space for play. There's a way in which that academic space can have a little bit of formal play to it, but you can think of that as then being constrained a little bit by what do we actually need to know about this? How do we let the movement set an agenda, but not too much?

So, scholars need to be driven by curiosity as by necessity. So, it's: "I'm just going to go off and research Byzantine ceramics over here!", that can have value in itself.

But then, at the same time, what do we need in the struggle around X now? So, maintaining a tension between those things is a thing. It's helpful.

But it also comes down to one's relation to students. And not all my students want to or are good at thinking politically. I want to be available for the students who are, but also to those who aren't.

I teach nightlife studies. So, I have students who are not going to the demonstration because they won't be awake. They're not getting up until eight at night.

So, it's "oh, okay". So, you can think about how power works in frames other than the political too. Sometimes we collapse everything into the political, but culture is also a form of power.

And police is a form of power. Aesthetics is a form of power. So, to think a little about all those as .

Mariella Popolla

If you want to share with us some thoughts about your work on raves as, can we say, as a resistance space?

McKenzie Wark

I don't think it's resistance. no, that's...

There's a way, conceptually, resistance centers the other. It centers what it's resistant to. So, it's "oh, maybe that's not the right conceptual frame".

This is one we used to use in the 90s. And it's funny because I'm essentially touring this book, *Raving*, which is now in four languages. And I keep getting asked if the book is about...Oh, so *Raving* is about resistance, subversion, transcendence, utopia. And it's no, no, no, no. What if we try to come up with a different language for it?

And maybe that's the work, to figure out how do those languages exhaust themselves and start to become a bit self-evident. We think we know what we mean when we say those things. So, if we change the language, then you can perceive it a little differently and come up with a different set of possibilities for it.

So, maybe it's actually not any of those things. So, then what is it? And it's "I wrote a whole book with different language and possibilities with a glossary in the back".

How else to think it? Not to then impose that language, but to say, maybe if we're taking rave culture seriously, then the language you would have around it would be as complicated and varied as around any other art. It's not collapsible to these things.

And it doesn't have value only because it supports something else. It has value in itself. But then it's also escapist. Maybe not. Some people are there, pretty much full time. They're not escaping. That's where they live. So, the project has been to change language. And I think then that also comes back to tension between the aesthetic and the political. It's my job to come up with language because I'm a writer. It's an art. And that's going to put some pressure on received political languages, or more the better, let's complicate and confuse that a little bit. I think part of the struggle is always in language itself.

Mariella Popolla

So, we have to work on this to understand better from the inside, maybe? We shall change the center, the point of observation?

McKenzie Wark

So, let's center the experience of raving. What does it feel to do it?

And how do aesthetic categories come out of that? And then an understanding of what it shows to be possible, and also the limits of what's possible in forms of self-organization now. A rave is not utopian because everybody brings their nonsense with them.

People bring their transphobia and their racism and everything through the door. It's not everybody magically stopped being that when they're at the party. And being good at raving is a thing you learn.

Not everybody knows how to do it. You have to learn it. And some of us would rather just be where people are good at it.

Some of us don't feel safe when certain people are allowed in the door. It's a complicated social cultural organism all in itself.

Mariella Popolla

Because we thought that, in our opinion, we imagined, for example, the raver culture somehow as a queer culture. But it's not necessarily the case.

McKenzie Wark

No, no. And those are separate things. And so, 80s, 90s British rave culture was working class young men, who were very heterosexual, and to put it in slightly cliched terms, decided to stop being football hooligans and beating the crap out of each other and to hug each other on ecstasy at the party instead. It's an awesome moment in the history of... And it's a very post-industrial story. They're dancing in the abandoned factories that several generations of their ancestors worked in. So, there's a particular history to that. So, rave has been different things in different places and times. And the word itself probably came from the West Indies in this usage. So, rave is an all-night party that's in an illegal, unlicensed venue because West Indian immigrants to England were not getting into clubs because of racism. So, they're creating a different, a house party, all-night house party stuff.

So, rave's been many different things. And the particular bit of it I was interested in in the book is queer and trans-centric rave culture in New York. Not everyone there is queer, right. It's just everybody abides by queer rules when they're there, if the party's any good. And there's a subset of trans women we call the dolls. I'm not one. But if the dolls come to your party, it's a good party and you have been blessed. You have been blessed, right. So, there's a little thread of the sacred in this...Always be careful about using that language because it can start to get a little hippy-dippy. But, there's a sense that, some version of what the sacred could be now is there as... And I don't have a good answer to this, as a third-generation atheist, but maybe we need a little thread of that. How do you have the sacred without the authoritarian structures of religion? You actually don't need those at all, but you might still need the sacred in some form. So, you're on the dance floor. You could call it transcendent. I don't think it is, but you're experiencing a different relation to being. And then one of the available languages for that is going to be political, and another is social, another is, whatever.

But maybe another one is you've touched the sacred on a good morning.

Mariella Popolla

So, thank you so much for your time, for your answers, and you've been really, really nice to us, and also with our English.

McKenzie Wark

I think it's going to sound great with little kids running around in the background, too.

Mariella Popolla

We are in a church, with kids around, talking about ravers.

McKenzie Wark

You're really good. You don't have to put ravers on it, because you've got it.

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