

Drugs, techno and the ecstasy of queer bodies

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Abstract

In *Cruising Utopia*, José Muñoz writes that ‘drugs are a surplus that pushes one off course, no longer able to contribute labor power at the proper tempo’. Their pharmacology of unproductive time also interacts in a synergistic/synaesthetic manner with the hypnotic upbeat tempos of electronic dance genres like disco, house or techno. In the club, drugs enhance sensations and draw bodies close together, all while sound penetrates the ear, turning it into an erotic orifice. Central to countercultural histories of sexual liberation, the club is a temple of queer world-making, a laboratory carrying out experiments with a queerness-yet-to-come. In this speculative autotheoretical essay, I explore the ethics and political value – as well as political ambivalence – of drug-fuelled techniques of self-invention encountered in the queer club. At once pharmacological, sexual and biopolitical, these modes of becoming-queer of bodies flooded by sound, drugs and sexual pleasure allude to the possibility of kinds of subjectivity and social relations that resonate with a narcofeminist ethics and veer away from neoliberal regimes of identity and belonging.

Keywords

club cultures, drugs, narcofeminism, queer, techno

Nightlife has always been at the core of queer subcultures and world-making. Kemi Adeyemi, Kareem Khubchandani and Ramón Rivera-Servera (2021) define queer nightlife as a set of practices that are ‘staged in the variety of permanent, temporary, stable, and mobile sites that queer people congregate in to get relief from the pressure of everyday life’ (p. 3). Of all those sites, the nightclub, particularly the techno club, has had a particular kind of appeal to many queer people – myself included – in that the music and the drugs that often accompany it have offered us something more than just relief, something in my view a lot more important; namely, a high-beats-per-minute means to individual and collective self-invention. In this article, I take an autotheoretical approach to reflect on the music and drug subcultures that have shaped my life, subject position and sociability as a queer man. I recall and reactivate those memories as a way of thinking

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with – and thinking through – the assemblages of sound, amateur ‘disco-pharmacology’ (Race, 2021, p. 107), consumption rituals, social relations, meanings, argot, pleasures and flesh that are fundamental aspects of many queer subcultures. Historically, these are assemblages that have creatively undone and reconfigured our bodies, and that have played a central role in our collective project of queer world-making – of terraforming a queer *oikos*, as it were – however ephemeral, however contingent and fragile. They are also assemblages that, in resonating with the ethos of the narcofeminist movement (Eurasian Harm Reduction Association, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c), allow us to think drugs differently and consider the self-enhancing or positive affects that, undertaken collectively, can reshape and reinvent the self and, as such, constitute a caring laboratory for embodied speculative research on a people and society yet to come.

In the preface to their collection of interviews about techno in Berlin after the Fall of the Wall, Felix Denk and Sven von Thülen (2014) claim that, at techno parties, ‘the human disappeared in the tracks; the artist subject dissolved in the circuitry of the drum machine, the binary codes of the sampler and the ever-changing project names of the producers’ (p. 10). This ethos of dissolving the self in order to re-form it anew, which is commonly found in the self-narrations of those in the scene, also informed the scene’s wider ecology. For instance, Alexander Branczyk (a.k.a. czyk), art director for the German techno magazine *Frontpage* (1989–1997), notes that, when it came to the magazine and its brand, ‘our continuity was meant to take the form of this constant self-transformation, this constantly reinventing ourselves and throwing ballast overboard’ (Denk & Thülen, 2014, p. 272). To many of us queers, therefore, the continuous and palpable self-transformation we lived in and through techno resonated and continues to resonate deeply with the processes through which we forged and continue to forge ourselves and our relations to the world, queerly. As Adeyemi et al. (2021) also suggest, queer nightlife

. . . teaches us to be nimble thinkers, moving with bodies, history, money, and aesthetics. We need this world because it archives politics (elsewhere undocumented) through gesture, memory, DJing techniques, promotional fliers, architecture. We need this world because, as the root and incubator of other kinds of politics and culture that feel more mainstream, urgent, serious, or researchable, it tells a fuller story. (p. 10)

Attending to queer nightlife as an important site of queer world-making is also a way of attending to queer history differently, by centring bodies and pleasures and the role these play both in the enfleshing of queer subjects and in the much-needed enfleshing of queer critique and historiography. To me, the queer club offers us precisely a way into the kind of queer body Elizabeth Freeman (2010) claims needs to be restored to queer studies. Namely, ‘the body erotic thought not only in terms of its possibilities for making sexual cultures but in terms of its capacities for labor – by which I mean both the social relations of production/reproduction and the expenditure of bodily energy’ (p. 18). It is only by centring this particular kind of queer body, *both* as the body of the scholar *and* the bodies of those we write about, that we will be able to move toward the erotohistoriography Freeman has famously called for:

As a mode of reparative criticism, erotohistoriography honors the way queer relations complexly exceed the present, insisting that various queer social practices, especially those involving enjoyable bodily sensations, produce forms of time consciousness – even historical consciousness – that can intervene into the material damage done in the name of development, civilization, and so on. Within these terms, we might imagine ourselves haunted by bliss and not just by trauma; residues of positive affect (idylls, utopias, memories of touch) might be available for queer counter- (or para-) historiographies. (p. 120)

Attending to erotohistoriography, to forms of storytelling queer lives that centre bodies and their sensorial affordances and topologies, contributes to highlighting the importance of personal and collective memory for the lives and self-narrations of subjects of sociological research. As Michael Kelly and Hilary Dickinson (1997) write, ‘the sociological self *is*, rather than merely expresses, the narratives which people use to present their autobiographies’ (p. 274). In that context of the sociological self as narration, the scripts we use to articulate our individual existence are as much personal as they are collective, with our bodies finding themselves always at the intersection of what is gone and what will have been. Following William Simon and John Gagnon (2003), ‘it is the historical situation of the body that gives the body its sexual (as well as all other) meanings’ (p. 492). Whether we’re talking of drug cultures, club cultures, sex cultures, or their intersections, initiation and participation in them involve forms of knowledge exchange – often intergenerational – that help participants not only position themselves in and navigate a particular scene but also understand themselves in relation to its specific cultural histories (Florêncio, 2021; Race, 2021; Thornton, 1995). In the darkness of the queer club, in particular, music, dancing styles, drugs and codes of sexual sociability ‘conjure the past and “drag” history through the body’ (Adeyemi et al., 2021, p. 9). Where the present is the object of sociological study, history is what structures its cultural meaning.

Such an approach allows us to also find a way out of the ‘juridical imaginary’ that Oliver Davis and Tim Dean (2022), building on Robyn Wiegman (2012), claim to be behind much of contemporary queer studies’ abandonment of sex – and, by extension, desire and pleasure – as object of analysis. When sex and the body appear in contemporary queer studies, Davis and Dean provocatively argue, it is always and only framed by a juridical imaginary queer scholars have uncritically borrowed from Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1989, 1991) foundational legal-theoretical work on intersectionality. It is here, in veering away from the seemingly growing lack of interest in bodies and pleasure in contemporary queer studies – concerned as they have increasingly become with legal frameworks and institutional politics¹ – that thinking with the queer body in/on ecstasy in the techno club can open up alternative pathways for rethinking and re-enfleshing queerness as an embodied practice of self that do not overlook the affordances of pleasure, of the body as a delightful fabric of sensual interfaces. It can help reconnect queerness with the erotic and the affective, reminding us of their power to forge individuals and their social relations in ways that exceed the institutionalised politics of identity on which much of contemporary LGBTQ politics and scholarship have centred themselves. In taking this path, I align myself with the work of other scholars who, working at the intersections of queer studies, sociology, media and science and technology studies,

continue to work against the trend identified by Davis and Dean. Disrupting that trend, which Davis and Dean identify mostly among Anglo-American queer scholars, authors like Fay Dennis (2019), Kane Race (2009, 2018, 2021), Kiran Pinaar et al. (2020a, 2020b), Kristian Møller (2020) or Susanna Paasonen (2018) are among those who highlight the importance of centring the affective affordances of bodies, their pleasures and sensations, when researching sex and drug cultures and their role in shaping contemporary subjectivities. Yet, unlike these authors, who continue to be foundational to my own thinking, the approach that I take here is slightly different.

In privileging autotheory to more established research methodologies, my aim is to critically dramatise or creatively enact my own subject position not only as a scholar but as a life-long participant in the cultures about which I write, and to use that approach to offer a case study of some of the ways in which amateur or popular knowledge formations often blur with or contaminate more institutionalised forms of knowledge, and vice versa, highlighting the ‘osmotic’ nature of the knowledge exchanges between diverse kinds of societal formations, as well as the status of contemporary subjectivities as a ‘mosaic’ that is assembled through our movement across different scenes, cultures and institutions (Ulusoy & Firat, 2018; Weinzierl & Muggleton, 2003). Like autoethnography, an autotheoretical approach centres the researcher as their own object of enquiry. Unlike autoethnography, however, autotheory fully embraces the idea that remembering is always, to a certain extent, a creative or productive task, while also providing the researcher a certain degree of freedom to fully think with their own body, their desires and their flesh and to speculate not only on what the past may have been but also on what the future may become. Writing autotheoretically is therefore not just an instance of *graphos* – a kind of writing that expresses the sociological self – but it is also an instance of *poēsis* – a making, a fabrication of the self. In that way, autotheoretical writing is a hypomnesic technique. That is, it ‘produces as much as it records the event’ and always in relation to a future (Derrida, 1995, p. 17). To remember as a queer person is always a way of cruising and embodying time to forge more capacious structures of meaning (Muñoz, 2009).

Writing in her introduction to *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*, Lauren Fournier (2021) defines autotheory as a term that encompasses ‘works that exceed existing genre categories and disciplinary bounds, that flourish in the liminal spaces between categories, that reveal the entanglement of research and creation, and that fuse seemingly disparate modes to fresh effects’ (p. 2). With its nature ‘grounded in the personal-theoretical, incidental, gut-centered’ (p. 5), autotheoretical research is ‘the integration of the *auto* or “self” with philosophy or theory, often in ways that are direct, performative, or self-aware’ (p. 6). Autotheory thus has the potential to become an important source for sociological studies of drug use and queer and feminist drug cultures, due to the ways in which it itself seeks to enact that which it attempts to grasp from an embodied first-person position. Fournier explains, when tracing the genealogy of what has recently come to be known as autotheory:

The present-day turn to autotheory owes a great deal to transnational feminist histories of art, literature, criticism, and activism. Indeed, the history of feminism is, in a sense, a history of autotheory – one that actively seeks to bridge theory and practice and upholds tenets like ‘the

personal is political.’ . . . Certainly, the practice of theorizing from the first person is well established within the genealogies of feminism and after the 1960s it takes on a particularly conceptual and performative valence. (p. 8)

As Paul Preciado claims in *Testo Junkie*, one of the defining works of autotheory:

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, our species had literally stuck good philosophical intentions up our ass, filming the thing before marketing the images from it. The philosophy of the pharmacopornographic regime has been reduced to an enormous, dripping butt-plug camera. In such circumstances, the philosophy of such high-punk modernity can only be autotheory, autoexperimentation, auto-techno-penetration, pornology. (Preciado, 2013, p. 347)

Practices of creative and experimental self-writing resonate not only with broader queer and feminist projects of world-making but also with recent invitations, carried out within *The Sociological Review* itself, for ‘*new ways of writing the social* for both a trans- and post-disciplinary academy and a wider reading public’ (Kilby & Gilloch, 2022, p. 635, italics in original). For those authors, writing differently must also be a way of allowing ‘difference to register’ away from the anthropocentric, patriarchal and colonial subject of the academic writing tradition. It must, in short, ‘[conjure] up the social world differently’ (p. 643). Moreover, those are practices that help us interrogate the sociological imagination by ‘translating individually experienced “troubles” into public “issues”’ (Latimer & Skeggs, 2011, p. 395) thus contributing to the work of ‘unpacking and contesting the specifics of the work imaginaries do, including our own’ (p. 397).

Important in the context of this essay, are also the ways in which conjuring social worlds differently resonates with the ethos of the narcofeminist movement, one which seeks the freedom for women to forge themselves and their bodies and where drugs are seen as a valuable catalyst in a project of feminist self-creation (Chang, 2020; Eurasian Harm Reduction Association, 2019a). In that context, writing personally, or writing the personal, has important stakes. As Judy Chang (2020) notes, personal reflections and experiences are important tools for the narcofeminist writer. Anchoring their political thinking in the personal, in line with various histories of feminist critique and activism, makes it such that ‘subjectivities, rather than continuing to be our sites of constraint, can, through intentional work, become sites of resistance through the ascription of alternate and different meanings’ (p. 272).

With the above in mind, in this essay I am drawing from my own experiences as a queer teenager and, later, young adult who was drawn to clubbing and techno from an early age. I will be reminiscing about some of those events in my past and thinking with them in order to articulate the role drugs and drug-fuelled clubbing have played in my – and others’ – becoming-queer. I will also be reflecting on the various kinds of scaffolding put in place in those instances in order to privilege, as best as possible, pleasure and joy over pain, creative self-invention through experimentation over self-destruction through unguided intoxication, even though all of these will always have existed and been weaved into one another to different extents. In doing so, my aim is to enact a narcofeminist ethics in my autotheoretical reflections on queer club cultures of drug use. Through that,

what follows will, I hope, align itself with Donna Haraway's (1988) call for situated forms of knowledge as a form of feminist – and, I would say, queer – scholarly praxis:

I am arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. These are claims on people's lives. I am arguing for the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity. Only the god trick is forbidden. (p. 589)

In placing myself and the archive that is my body autotheoretically at the centre of my thinking, I hope to follow on the path inaugurated by feminist scholars who aimed to turn scholarship into a space for 'practicing new subjectivities, for beginning to do in and through writing what theories of hybrid, multivoiced, engaged, and embodied social subjectivities have encouraged us to imagine' (Pollock, 2007, p. 242). My intention is that this approach will both complicate and add to existing sociological understandings of queer subjectivities and drug use, by enacting a queer writing subject that, in being both researcher and object of research, is able to offer some insight into some of the ways in which academic institutions are positively porous to subcultural practices, meanings and structures of feeling, and how, in turn, institutional knowledge feeds back into and informs – that is, gives form to – subcultural formations and life scripts.

Smalltown boy

I was born in a very small village next to a small rural town in the centre of Portugal. Like so many other towns of similar characteristics, mine was a town where opportunities were lacking even in 1983 – the year I was born – nine years after the Carnation Revolution had ended the longest fascist dictatorship in Europe. I recall my mother telling me of waking up in the middle of the night when she was a young girl and finding my grandpa and his father listening to what she would eventually realise was pirate communist radio. My dad, who had been born in a nearby village and had met my mother at a local village fête, had also been involved in clandestine revolutionary organising during those dictatorship years, especially after, as a teenager, he was conscripted to the military and had to move to the outskirts of Lisbon to serve in the armed forces.

This memory of potentiality, of transformational possibility – lived vicariously through my family's stories and still present in my recollections of them – was deeply foundational to my own sense of self and my lifeworld. That, despite the fact that the small town in which I grew up, and the vast majority of people around me, were soon to be found unable to echo some of what I was becoming as I realised my desire for a different political order was deeply enmeshed with my desire for a sexual life and culture that I couldn't find anywhere around me at the time. The becoming that I was living in my body, my realisation of its potential to expand into new sexual-affective horizons, wasn't being reciprocated by a local community that, despite its attachments to leftist politics, still had a lot of catching-up to do with the sexual and moral 'revolutions' that had taken over Europe and the USA in the late 1960s – revolutions from which they had

been mostly shielded by a protectionist and nationalist dictator famous for having once described Portugal as a nation ‘proudly alone’.

In that context, I found myself seeking places and body practices that would resonate with and, ideally, affirm my own teenage becoming, my becoming-queer. I found them first online, thanks to the introduction of dial-up internet and the boom in gay-themed chatrooms that soon followed, and then in local rave scenes and associated drug cultures. These two avenues complemented one another, in that they allowed me to find in two places the things that, at the time, I couldn’t find together in any single one of them. Online chatrooms allowed me to engage with likeminded people living far away, to learn about queer sex, queer cultures, and to undertake a pedagogy of desire that soon led me to travel miles to hang out and sometimes hook up with some of the guys I had met online, who had become my first queer family. In turn, the local rave scene, even though mostly made up of heterosexual people, allowed me to live my body in radically different ways, to experience modulations and amplifications of pleasure and affect that I had rarely encountered before, to – for the first time – sense myself and my flesh as plastic and my being as horizon of becoming. Drugs, of course, were central to it. And I’m not talking simply about finding respite from a highly claustrophobic queerphobic local cultural milieu. I’m not talking as much about healing as I am talking about processes of collective self-invention, not so much about dealing with past traumas lingering in the present but – most importantly, I think – about actively speculating ourselves and our bodies toward a more expansive future (Pienaar et al., 2020a, 2020b). Drugs allowed me that. In the derelict abandoned factories and fields of rural Portugal, where I raved in my late teens, even the toughest, most macho, straight techno-heads became somewhat softer, more welcoming and capacious. Drugs allowed them that, too. Drugs allowed us to move past whatever boundaries we had thought delimited our selves and our bodies’ capacities for relation, pleasure and affect – for joy. Amidst the pumping techno, the evaporated sweat would condense on the ceilings and rain down on the crowd, the erotics of being touched by the sweat of strangers heightened by the drugs of choice – MDMA, ketamine, cocaine, LSD – and moving the singular toward the plural. This was the self as a cocktail of others, an ontic mixology, an erotic constellation.

The answers you seek will never be found at home

My move to Lisbon in 2001 to start my undergraduate studies coincided with the early-2000s boom of electro and minimal techno in the Portuguese capital. The clubs of the city became research laboratories for the techno- and drug-fuelled processes of queer collective becoming and relating that I partook in as a smalltown boy seeking answers I hadn’t found at home. There, listening and dancing to the likes of Ellen Alien, Miss Kittin, T.Raumschmiere, Michael Mayer, Modeselektor, Superpitcher, Expander or Nelson Flip + Yellow, I made friends and met lovers. I made friends of lovers and lovers of friends. I made friends and lovers out of people who inhabited class positions that were very different from the ones I had been exposed to growing up in rural Portugal. Leaving those riverside clubs in the morning, the bright Atlantic breeze caressed our faces as we’d sit by the river watching cruise ships full of tourists who were arriving to consume the city in a day being welcomed by club kids dancing on piers. In some of

those mornings, I would sometimes find myself eventually heading to the apartment of an older architect friend whom I had met in the scene. There, we would drink whisky and come down from drugs listening to rather eclectic playlists that always somehow made sense, that always somehow resonated with the stuff circulating through our veins and thoughts at those moments as the morning settled in – Lydia Lunch, Diamanda Galas, Felix Kubin, Yannis Xenakis, Phillip Glass, Steve Reich, Pauline Oliveros, Stravinsky. We would listen to them and discuss German philosophy, French literature, politics, visual arts – my friend was a huge fan of Cy Twombly, I adored Louise Bourgeois – and one of our most treasured and shared loves, the works of German choreographer Pina Bausch.

Suffice to say that, despite all the embarrassing clichés I now tenderly recognise in these memories, those early years of my higher education in Lisbon included a lot more than university classrooms. They were all the more foundational and meaningful for that. University classrooms never taught me about pleasures and affects – about the erotic dimensions of learning. Instead, I was expected to park my body elsewhere before entering the straight rooms of academia. Learning, I was supposedly meant to know, is something one does with the mind and the mind alone. Yet, separating my knowledge from my body, disembodied my knowledge, was something that I, a young queer, found unnecessarily painful and splitting, some type of fundamental and generalised psychosis of modernity. It was only in those other moments when neural synapses found themselves firing in all manner of unforeseen directions – catalysed by music, drugs, sex – that the kinds of knowledge and thinking I was developing in the classroom would finally make sense to me and become tangible, that they finally mattered, in that it was only then that they became embodied knowledge, informed flesh. Similarly, it was the knowledge of the classroom that would come to inform my knowledge of drugs and drug cultures themselves. Drugs shaped the way in which I understood both scholarship and aesthetics as a kind of erotics. Scholarship, in turn, highlighted to me the potential of queer drug cultures as cultures of self- and world-making.

The erotics of the techno, the drugs, the queer sex were a fundamental part of my libidinal attachments to knowledge, to learning and to pedagogy, even if the libidinal nature of knowledge – of all knowledge – is often masked by what we could call, for lack of a better phrasing, the academic contract. Of course, learning and producing knowledge is a kind of work in that, as a self-transformative activity, it requires time and energy. As such, of course capital will always try to extract value from it; that is clear when we hear about the night-time economy. But learning and producing knowledge are also, at their best, a pursuit of pleasures unforeseen. This is at the core of the libidinal nature of capital – it is easier to ignore the extraction of value from our work when work makes us feel pleasure and pleasure, in turn, can make us docile workers. And yet, at the same time, overtly acknowledging pleasure – the embodied erotics of knowing, how the thirst for knowledge is different only in degree from the thirst for someone or something that promises to flood our bodies with electricity – has to be concealed in the name of a ‘proper’ and serious work ethic, in the name of both property and propriety. Sublimating desire and pleasure through exclusively pursuing institutionalised pedagogies and forms of knowledge was something I was not – then like now – willing to do.

Scratching the walls of metaphysics

During my formative early twenties in Lisbon, there was another older friend – a gay psychologist – with whom I’d engage in drug-taking marathons which we would approach as experiments carried out on the self. My friend would often describe it as ‘scratching the walls of metaphysics’. I always found that to be a beautiful expression, one that would somehow join together a chemically-mediated practice of self and the kinds of scholarly questions and problems I was increasingly gravitating toward as a queer undergraduate student. To scratch is not to overcome. Scratching an itch does not do away with it. What it does instead is to modulate the discomfort of the itch into a plateau of pleasure that only lasts for as long as we scratch, so we have to keep on scratching or else. As Sebastian, one of the intravenous drug users quoted in Marie Jauffret-Roustide’s contribution to this volume noted after scratching himself, ‘Oh that one felt good!’ (Jauffret-Roustide, this volume). To scratch the borders of the self, to scratch there where it itches, isn’t that what queering ultimately is? Namely, taking a negative affect and corrupting it into positive excess? A scratching that loves itself as pleasure, that the more it scratches the more its pleasure intensifies, and that thus refuses to resolve into an absence of itch, that indeed requires the itch as condition for the pleasure of scratching it seeks to inhabit, a pleasure so strong it propels the itchy self into a plateau of formless possibility where, for a moment, anything can become anything else.

To scratch the walls of metaphysics as we did, or as we told ourselves we were doing, raises questions about the self, culture and social formations – as well as about different ways in which all three are forged, challenged and modulated both at the scale of the individual and that of a collective. These were areas of scholarship to which I had been introduced in ethnomusicology classes and which started resonating deeply with the personal and social practices I had found myself engaging in. They started resonating with the kinds of unashamedly erotic pursuits of knowledge that – in an equally radical manner – had begun to shape my own sense of self outside the classrooms of that most left-leaning and socially-liberal Lisbon university. There, where students would often share joints and beers, and talk politics in between classes with the local punks, squatters and anarchists (some of them also students) who would usually hang out on campus. It was therefore difficult for me to separate the institutionalised knowledge of the university from the vernacular knowledge of the streets and the clubs. After all, some of the people I would encounter on campus would also be found in the clubs I’d go to. The university as I experienced it during my formative years as both a left-wing and a queer student was no ivory tower. Instead, it was a porous threshold, an osmotic interface allowing bodies and ideas to cross its walls into and from the streets and the dance floors of the city. All of those sites appeared to me to be concerned with similar questions, with a shared investment in ‘scratching the walls of metaphysics’, as my good friend would romantically put it to describe what we saw as chemical and ritual interventions on ourselves that pushed against what we had previously understood to be the limits of embodied being. The cadence of the scholarship would resonate with the cadence of the poetry we liked to read and both would resonate with the beats we’d dance to at night. Such was the path that forged me.

In *Psychedelic White*, Arun Saldanha (2007) notes that ‘there exist molecules that upon ingestion fundamentally change the way the human body relates to things, space, and time itself’ (p. 69). As part of his materialist ethnography of the production of whiteness in the context of trance parties in Goa, India, Saldanha suggests that ‘transformations of self be studied within assemblages of substances, brains, sounds, cultural beliefs, institutions, international relations, money, and, ultimately, the differentiation of bodies’ (p. 89). Attending to drug use in particular, he goes on to claim that:

Different bodies react differently to the same molecules in different places. There are other forces at work apart from the neurochemical. A materialist psychopharmacology should be committed to explaining drug effects as determined through embodied interaction. We can then appreciate that drug taking facilitates differences between brains, which in turn facilitate distinctions between populations of bodies. (p. 69)

While Saldanha’s work is not concerned with the production of queer sexualities, he nonetheless makes a compelling claim for the ‘freaking’ of whiteness, the mechanisms of which are useful to understand the queer potential of drug use and its contexts. To do so, he draws from Deleuze and Guattari’s work to reflect on the enmeshment of viscosity and the lines of flight catalysed by drugs, ritual and dancing at Goa’s trance parties. Like race in Saldanha’s work, sexuality is also produced through the enmeshment of what Deleuze and Guattari described as machinic phenomena of stratification or territorialisation, and deterritorialisations enacted by means of lines of flight:

A machinic geography of race maps the physical connections that constitute racial differences, and considers language, attitude, feeling, and media representations only in their properly spatial functioning. Although my ethnography applied the term ‘viscosity’ only to human bodies, it should be clear that humans only become viscous through nonhuman things and forces in their midst. When many bodies become viscous they together acquire what Deleuze called a kinetic and dynamic dimension, that is, an aggregate’s way of holding together, and its capacity to affect and be affected. (p. 191)

Where viscosity allows bodies to coalesce into molar aggregates, lines of flight like those catalysed by drugs have the potential to open molecular lines of flight that deterritorialise those aggregates. At the same time, however, as Saldanha notes, there is always a risk that the ‘viscous, oppressive, predictable organization’ Deleuze and Guattari associated with molarity will be found ‘seeping in through the back door’ of molecular lines of flight (p. 211), as his own ethnography has shown with regard to the eventual becoming-viscous of Goa freaks’ molecular whiteness.

Saldanha’s materialist ethnography of race resonates with the practices and contexts I’ve been describing, in which my own becoming-queer took place. Furthermore, his own call for a materialist psychopharmacology echoes existing research on drug use among queer communities. In *Pleasure Consuming Medicine*, for instance, Kane Race (2009) highlights the role that drugs like ecstasy played in the queer dance party scene at the height of the HIV epidemic. He writes that queer dance parties were not just about escapism. Instead, they had ‘a series of effects that were more materially productive’ and which he describes as a way to envision and forge community ‘as a viable way of

contending with the HIV/AIDS epidemic' (p. 20). In that context, and in a way that echoes Saldanha's reflection on the machinic nature of Goa's trance parties, Race asks:

What if we were to understand the dance party not as the transparent radiation of community, but as a mediated event through which a sense of community was hallucinated? The massed bodies, decorations, lights, drugs, costumes, and music combined to produce a powerful and widely accessed perception of presence, belonging, shared circumstance, and vitality at a time when the image of the gay man, dying alone, ostracized from family, was the publicly proffered alternative. . . .

Of course, while ecstasy was an important actor in the formation of this community, it was not the only or immediate cause of it. Community was conceived in other domains of discourse, practice, and politics, each interweaving with the dance-party phenomenon in direct and indirect ways. (pp. 22–23)

Both Saldanha's and Race's work allude to the fact that, whether in the context of trance parties in Goa or of the urban queer dance scenes of the Global North, drugs have an infrastructural role in shaping and modulating the self and its relations to others. Drugs are 'infrastructures of intimacy', to borrow the term Susanna Paasonen (2017) uses in relation to the role played by networked media in contemporary forms of intimacy and belonging. Like network connectivity, drugs too are 'not merely an instrumental factor – or "channel" – for mediated belongings, but a sociotechnical affordance that supports and modulates them' (p. 103). This is also supported by recent work by Kiran Pienaar, Dean Murphy, Kane Race and Toby Lea (2020a) drawing from qualitative interviews about drug use among 42 self-identified LGBTQ Australians. Building on those interviews, the authors align themselves with existing research that supports the idea that 'drugs are not only consumed by individual subjects, but are active in materialising these subjects' (p. 2). As catalysts and modulators of both the self and its interpersonal relations, drugs work as part of what they call "'sexual architectures": the erotic relations, emotions, practices, spaces and meanings that jointly constitute the sexual experience', wherein 'drugs play a performative role in the intensification of desire, arousal and sexual pleasure' (p. 4). In working as part of queer infrastructures of the self and its relations, drugs are catalysts of what David Lenson (1995) terms 'somatic bricolage' (p. 186), a 'tinkering' with bodies understood by users as a process that 'enhances their understanding of the way their bodies work' (p. 179). For Lenson – just like for Pienaar et al. – drugs work by triggering an 'apotheosis of desire itself' (p. 184). In doing so, they fuel a queer somatic bricolage by helping draw a new erotic cartography of the body – and, by extension, the self – that is 'demarcated with more "landmarks" of pleasure' (p. 185). Drugs extend the self by discovering, producing, dislocating and relocating interfaces of sensation and pleasure across the inner and outer surfaces of the body. This kind of drug-fuelled erotic bricolage queers the body in that it allows the subject to emerge and affirm itself as 'incidental' from a set of bio-socio-technical coordinates (Race, 2009, p. 166). Embodied subjectivities at the queer techno party are modulated by particular assemblages of flesh, drugs, music, affects, desire, meanings and social and sexual relations. They also oftentimes find themselves taken over by unexpected sensations, making them

always-already contingent entities in a becoming towards unforeseen horizons that veer away from and exceed any regime of prior intentionality. Machinic assemblages of drug use such as the ones I have encountered and continue to encounter in queer clubbing scenes therefore always involve ‘queer practices of self-relation’ (Race, 2009, p. 185). As Race argues:

Rather than insisting upon a sovereign subject at the site of drug use, this approach entails a degree of attention to and curiosity about *how the body is*, in a given situation – the queerness of its pleasures, their irreducibility to conventional predictions, scripts, and formulations. (p. 185)

This irreducibility of the queer and high – or queerly high – subject to the sovereignty assigned to the idealised neoliberal subject (Beistegui, 2018; Rasmussen, 2011) raises productive questions with regard to the relationship between the drug-fuelled dancing queer subject and scripts of identity and belonging. In the queer club, music, sex and drugs work in tune and in synchronicity to erotically dilate the spatiotemporal coordinates of the self and of its consciousness of itself (Florêncio, 2020a, 2021). ‘Drugs are a surplus that pushes one off course, no longer able to contribute labor power at the proper tempo’, José Muñoz (2009) writes, noting that ‘surplus is not simply an additive; it distorts – a stuttering particularity that shoves one off course, out of straight time’ (pp. 154–155). Working in ‘synergistic interaction’ with drugs in the techno club (Reynolds, 2012, p. 413), repetitive sounds contribute to and enhance the very same expansive temporality that Muñoz saw being catalysed by drugs. Techno sounds create the sonic substrate for ‘an eternally-expandable present of never-ending pleasure’ (Florêncio, 2020b, p. 207). For, as composer Raymond Murray Schafer (2004) put it, ‘the ear is also an erotic orifice. Listening to beautiful sounds, for instance the sounds of music, is like the tongue of a lover in your ear’ (p. 9). In so doing, sounds and drugs amplify and modulate the spatiotemporality of desire and pleasure of the subject; they blur the boundaries of sense-perception and make self and other, ‘I’ and world porous to one another.

In the case of queer people, this kind of bio-socio-technical deterritorialisation of the embodied self acquires a deeply fundamental and, I’d argue, life-saving meaning. Fiona Buckland (2002) puts it thus:

Dancing in a queer club was both a suspension and escape from the normativity of everyday life and yet brought movement from it to construct or rehearse the possibilities for everyday life. These practices constructed lifeworlds as a production in the moment of a space of possibilities, which remained fluid and moving by means of the dancing body, as it improvised from moment to moment. (p. 126)

In my own experience, as noted at the start of this essay, the queer techno party became an heterotopic machinic assemblage for the production of new embodied constellations of subjectivity, desire and pleasure, one that resonated with the ‘queer pharmatopia’ Oliver Davis (2018) defined as ‘the autonomous social structures of care and meaning-making in an environment in which the consumption of illegal drugs is more the norm than the exception’ (pp. 170–171). According to Davis,

The queerness of the pharmatopia consists in the fact that its drugs bring a heightened sensual experience of corporeality and enable meaningfully erotic encounters which overstep participants' usual sense of their own sexual identity or orientation. The pharmatopia illuminates – by materializing and embodying – Foucault's somewhat enigmatic queer alternative to 'sexuality', in the sense of the regime of stabilized identities constituted by the expert practice of veridiction he names *scientia sexualis*: 'bodies and pleasures.' (p. 176)

Catalysed by pumping repetitive sounds working in tandem with the drugs of choice, the queer techno party opens up spaces of individual and relational indeterminacy not unlike the subjunctive mode that Victor Turner (1982) associated with social dramas, describing it as the 'not yet settled, concluded, and known', 'all that may be, might be, could be, perhaps even should be' (pp. 76–77). Later on, referring specifically to what he describes as the 'liminoid' spaces of play 'between the role-playing times of "work" in modern culture' (p. 114), Turner writes that, while work 'is in the indicative mood of culture', play is

. . . in the subjunctive or optative moods, the moods of feeling and desire, as opposed to those cognitive attitudes which stress rational choice, full (if reluctant) acceptance of cause-and-effect, repudiation of mystical participation or magical affinities, calculation of probable outcomes of action, and awareness of realistic limitation on action. (p. 115)

Entertaining the subjunctive 'might be' as a mode of queer becoming, the queer techno party is a world-making machinic assemblage that triggers 'ripples across identities' by '[opening] up one's sense of bodily horizons of possibility and, in doing so, [pushing] the boundaries of previously defined identifications' (Paasonen, 2018, p. 134). It is a laboratory for seriously playful experiments that enact 'an "inflation" of both the individual and social body' with drugs as a common catalyst (Gauthier, 2004, p. 71). Our bodies are sensory interfaces that can be reconfigured, re-formed, remapped 'through a kind of wild and experimental free play that re-marks, reinscribes orifices, glands, sinews, muscles differently' (Grosz, 1995, p. 289). As a result, rather than discovering itself and its body, the subject creates itself, subjunctively:

In this way, the subject's body ceases to be *a* body, and becomes the site of provocations and reactions, the site of intensive disruptions. The subject ceases to be a subject, giving way to pulsations, gyrations, fluxes, secretions, swellings, processes over which it can exert no control and to which it only wants to succumb. Its borders blur, seep, liquefy, so that, for a while at least, it is no longer clear where one organ, body or subject stops and another begins. (p. 289)

While Elizabeth Grosz was not writing specifically about drugs, techno or queer clubs, she may as well have been. Many are the pulsations, gyrations, fluxes, secretions and swellings that I recall when I think back to the many club nights that have populated and continue to populate my life.

Yet, it is this very impulse, at once creative and destructive, that also animates capitalism itself. The abstract machine of capital, as Deleuze and Guattari (1983) have argued, operates through processes of decoding and deterritorialisation always followed by recodings and reterritorialisations. This is a tension that has also been identified by Arun

Saldanha in his discussion of the microfascist ‘viscosity’ of race as it emerged, decoded only to then be recoded, in Goa’s trance parties. There, among the white ravers – and despite their chemically-catalysed attempts to erase difference, as well as appeals to ‘PLUR’, peace, love, unity, respect – Saldanha (2007) witnessed connections precipitating into ‘viscosity, bodies slowing down, sticking together, and collectively becoming impenetrable’ (p. 207). Similarly, in queer clubs, I have encountered and continue to encounter instances of certain bodies becoming viscous to specific bodies, to forms of faciality, that which ‘crystallizes all redundancies’, which ‘releases and recaptures signifying signs’ and which ‘marks the limit of their deterritorialization’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 587). Those were instances of crystallisations of subjectivities, of striated patterns emerging in the coalescence of smooth flesh. Oftentimes, those moments of viscosity would take place around race attractors, as Saldanha identified in Goa. But they would also regularly coalesce around genders, sex practices, body types, fetish families (rubber, leather, sportswear), preferred drugs, wealth, politics.

Importantly, sometimes drug assemblages also result in reterritorialisations of the subject through addiction, as well as overdoses. This should not be dismissed or minimised. Deleuze and Guattari, writing in *A Thousand Plateaus*, have famously drawn attention to those risks which they associate not with a ‘causal infrastructure’ but as an ‘abstract line of creative or specific causality’, one in which ‘desire directly invests perception, and perception becomes molecular at the same time as the imperceptible is perceived’. In that context, ‘drugs then appear as the agent of this becoming’ (1987, p. 283). The core of the issue lies, for the authors, in the ways in which desire leads drug users to read causation into drug taking:

But if it is true that drugs are linked to this immanent, molecular perceptive causality, we are still faced with the question of whether they actually succeed in drawing the plane necessary for their action. . . . What good does it do to perceive as fast as a quick-flying bird if speed and movement continue to escape somewhere else? The deterritorializations remain relative, compensated for by the most abject reterritorializations, so that the imperceptible and perception continually pursue or run after each other without ever truly coupling. . . . Instead of making a body without organs sufficiently rich or full for the passage of intensities, drug addicts erect a vitrified or emptied body, or a cancerous one: the causal line, creative line, or line of flight immediately turns into a line of death and abolition. The abominable vitrification of the veins, or the purulence of the nose – the glassy body of the addict. (1987, pp. 284–285)

For Deleuze and Guattari, the problem with drug use is that, driven by desire, drug users establish a causal connection between drugged perception and a creative becoming that nonetheless repeatedly fails to deliver on its promise. Repetitive drug use thus sustains an ongoing attempt to maintain a desiring-production orientated towards a destination that the authors considered impossible to be delivered by drugs, instead reterritorialising the body of the drug user into an addict body.

Yet, rather than sustaining dominant medical, political and criminal approaches to drug use, what Deleuze and Guattari’s work on drug assemblages does is highlight the importance of attending to the cultural ecosystem of drug use, to the kinds of ‘sublimatory’ scaffolds – ethical, aesthetic, political – that, drawing from Davis (2018, pp.

174–175), ought to guide the ‘desublimatory’ affordances of drugs. In short, the focus of our thinking ought to be the *how* of taking drugs, not the *what* of drugs themselves.

In *Transpositions*, Rosi Braidotti (2006) reads Deleuze and Guattari to focus on the relationship between drug use and the embodied temporalities of life. To her, ‘alcoholism is an addiction to life, not the courting of death: it determines the need to drink anew and drink again’ (p. 213). To the alcoholic and other drug addicts, ‘the present is experienced as having been, as perpetual loss. It is a process of orchestrated demolition of the self – a long deep crack’ (p. 213). In that context, Braidotti goes on to propose an ethical approach to drug use that resonates deeply with my own experience of it:

The ethical position with relation to alcoholism, as in other similar states of self-destruction, is to take equal distance from two related pitfalls. One is the moralistic condemnation in the name of a belief in the intrinsic value of life. The other is the altruistic compassion for what is perceived as the alcoholic’s inability to make something of him- or herself [*sic*]. Both miss the point that states of alleged self-destruction are a subject’s way of coping with life; they are modes of living. . . . A nomadic ethics of sustainable becomings acknowledges this state and makes a powerful case for positive or affirmative states. . . . it *affirms* with calm rigour that there is nothing compelling or necessary about life and staying alive, while strongly urging the subject to cultivate the kind of relations that can help us to develop sustainable paths of becoming, or possible futures. (p. 213)

Braidotti’s care for life-affirming affects, for the things bodies do that orientate their lives towards possible futures, takes seriously and respects the infrastructural role that drugs and their cultures of use play in production of the subjectivities of their users. At the same time, and like the psychedelic transformation Saldanha identified as being a privilege of whiteness in Goa, the ability to ethically partake in the ‘electro-techniques of the Self’ (St John, 2004, p. 23) taking place in the fast-gentrifying queer neighbourhoods of our 21st-century cities is fast becoming the privilege of wealthy professional middle-classes who can afford it and who have enough structure in their lives to be more likely to manage it. There is a price to pay for our queer nightlife package of self-invention, and increasingly it is not cheap. Housing, financial stability, cultural and social capital, they all correlate to different levels of access to these queer spaces and are shaped by political and social histories of race, gender and class. It is therefore perhaps through attending not simply to the drug-fuelled porosity of bodies to one another, but also to the ways in which even queer assemblages can become viscous – in which queer bodies may become porous to one another but only in particularly overcoded ways of producing difference, under particular regimes of enfolded value – that a true queer ethics of the queer techno party can be forged. This would be a queer ethics that is aware of the potential for every queer party to become a breeding ground for microfascisms and authoritarian reterritorialisations, and that thus refuses to limit queer to particular kinds of pre-coded desires, sexualities or genders, moving on or hitting ‘pause’ once it finds itself crystallising and arresting bodies into life-hindering affects. Importantly, it would be a queer ethics of care, more of a collective journey alongside fellow travellers more invested in sustaining one another’s lives than in competing to see who can take the highest amounts of whatever substances are available that night.

If care is the always-already relational activity that ‘*includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our “world” so that we can live in it as well as possible*’ (Fisher & Tronto, 1990, p. 40, italics in original), to care in the relational and depersonalised space of the queer club, where drug taking is also a technology for writing forward new speculative forms of queer embodiment, is to ensure that our being is contingent not only on our survival but also on the survival of the relations and interdependencies that continuously produce and renew us. In the words of María Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), ‘interdependency is not a contract, nor a moral ideal – it is a *condition*. Care is therefore concomitant to the continuation of life for many living beings in more than human entanglements’ (p. 70). To care in the queer club is to hold oneself responsible for holding our kin together.

Given the above, the queer ethics I am claiming ought to sustain the queer club as a laboratory for experimentations with the plasticity of the self and the social, resonates deeply with the ethics advanced by narcofeminism, an intersectional movement that centres practices of ‘taking care of each other: sharing resources and opportunities to improve our mood, health and prosperity’ (Eurasian Harm Reduction Association, 2019b). Their ethico-political project, laid out in the 2019 Barcelona Declaration supported by over 100 European organisations, claims ‘the right to use drugs and experience pleasure’ as a pathway to ‘reclaim our bodily sovereignty’ and ‘live in safety and freedom’ (Eurasian Harm Reduction Association, 2019c). This is an ethics that pushes away from the discourses of prohibition, pathology, risk and trauma that, following Chang (2020), ‘constitute and shape the lives of women who use drugs’ (p. 278), and that draws attention to the myriad ways why women take drugs:

Women take drugs for all kinds of simple and complicated reasons, including the pursuit of ‘risky’ pleasures, to satiate curiosity, regain control and self-confidence, lose innocence, to regulate emotional and psychological pain, for enhanced productivity and to resist and rebel against social norms and expectations. (Chang 2020, p. 279)

Chang’s narcofeminist view – one that resonates with Braidotti’s claim that drug taking is primarily a mode of living, not a mode of dying – opens new ways for accounting for the subjectivities of drug users, and respects their ‘bodily integrity, dignity and self-determination’ (p. 286). As such, the identification of an ethics of care and self-invention to be nurtured between the queer club and the political ethos of the narcofeminist movement helps reveal the porosity between spaces of play and spaces of (political) work. Rather than being approached as liminal self-enclosed spaces detached from everyday life in line with the orthodoxy of ritual studies (Taylor, 2001; Turner, 1974, 1977; van Gennep, 1960), the border between the queer club and the everyday world of politics is porous, with what happens in one side – a drug-fuelled poetics of existence, a play with the body’s plasticity and ability to affect and be affected by other bodies – being osmotically carried through to the other side and vice versa. As Susanna Paasonen (2018) notes, ‘play remains attuned to the world in which it is set’ (p. 31), and it is here that the ethico-political value of the kinds of playful experimentation taking place in the queer club resides, becoming a means to forge intersectional solidarity and finding resonance with the political work of movements like narcofeminism.

Coda: ‘Take it, boy’

It was 2006 or 2007 and I had recently moved to the UK not just to study for my Masters but to continue the erotic experiments that had marked my undergraduate years. I can’t exactly recall how it happened but I remember one night a new friend – himself Portuguese – taking me to a monthly club night that used to take place in an old warehouse in East London, in the premises of an old-school club for trans women and their admirers. I remember walking down the little alleyway and the first thing I saw was a group of people congregated around a very small door. Next to them, a leatherman was pissing in another man’s mouth. Nobody paid them much attention, they were just two guys consensually and clearly enjoying themselves. As we got in, the crowd was like nothing I had ever seen before: cyberpunks, goth dykes, skinheads, drag queens, older cockney men, trans women of all ages, rubber men, techno queers in black vests and boots, sportswear gays, heterosexual couples. Inside, the DJ was pumping loud techno as the crowd trotted to an elsewhere while staying in place. The room was packed, the air heavy with sweat. Past the main room, to the right, there was another room with the largest bed I had ever seen. On it, a group of people in all manner of outfits and of all manner of genders were having sex. Everybody appeared to either already know one another or be happy to meet new people. I soon got dancing and chatting to those around me. It felt like I was witnessing something truly magical happening. It felt like I had perhaps finally encountered a place where I felt okay and where I could trust those around me, as it takes a certain kind of people to be open to such degree of difference around them. It takes a certain degree of vulnerability and empathy towards the other. As the night went on, at one point I went to the all-genders toilets which were at the back of the club. As I got in, the leatherman who had been pissing on the other guy when I got to the club was there, hanging out by the sinks, surrounded by drag queens, dykes, trans women. He pulled a vial of ketamine out of his pocket, took a little out, snorted it, took a little more and put it in front of my nose. ‘Take it, boy’, he instructed me, not having met me before. He then smiled, rubbed my head and gave me a peck on the lips. Afterwards we danced, took breaks outside sitting on the kerb and chatting about all manner of topics, then danced some more until the morning.

There was something in that moment that resonated with the relational practices of queer care I’ve been hinting at, practices that are not just about harm reduction but about investing ourselves in the lives and dignity of others – that is, about investing ourselves in the relationships that constitute us and our personal and collective histories. A queer dancefloor ethics works to ensure that drug use is scaffolded by systems of meaning and collective, peer-to-peer infrastructures of care that honour and affirm the lives within and around us, making us porous and open to one another, facilitating a sustainable collective exercise of becoming.

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1. For more on the institutional dimensions of this juridical turn in queer studies, namely as it has taken place alongside the academic institutionalisation of queer theory as queer studies, see Dean (2015) and Wiegman (2012).

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