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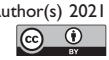
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Chemsex cultures: Subcultural reproduction and queer survival

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Abstract

"Chemsex" emerged in the 21st century as the gay and bisexual male practice of taking drugs during sexual encounters in order to modulate pleasures, promote endurance, and expand the temporalities of sex. Yet, while the term has come to prominence at a historical juncture when the introduction of antiretroviral drugs, locative dating apps, online pornography, and gentrification all contributed to the popularisation and mediation of the practice, the history of sex on drugs among gay men is longer than that. In this article, I draw from that history, as well as from wider critical histories and anthropologies of drug use in order to explore the subcultural significance of sexualised drug use amongst queer folk. If, as Bourdieu argued, the hegemony of the ruling classes is sustained by forms of economic, social, and cultural capital accumulation and reproduction, I build on scholarship on subcultural and post-subcultural studies to frame chemsex as a practice of subcultural reproduction that connects contemporary gay and bisexual men across generations, ensuring the survival of their cultures and subjectivities. In so doing, I focus on chemsex's potential as a life-affirming cultural practice, one that can ensure the symbolic and even material survival not only of the men who engage in it, but also of the subcultures and subcultural histories within which they locate themselves every time they decide to "party and play."

Keywords

Chemsex, drugs, queerness, subcultures, subcultural reproduction

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A few years ago, in 2015, I travelled to New York City to visit a friend whom I had met the previous year in Shanghai. One night, as we were about to have sex, having it, or otherwise talking about it, the conversation progressed to discussing the consumption of crystal methamphetamine (also known as "ice" or "Tina"), as well as the eroticisation of such practice, by some men who have sex with men (MSM), in what is commonly known as "chemsex" or "party 'n' play." My friend proceeded to open his web browser and show me a website aimed at connecting gay men into fetish and kinky sex. There, as he opened a video chat room, we were able to see various men smoking or injecting the drug on camera, some—albeit not all—also having sex while doing so. What fascinated me about that first encounter with live online displays of drug consumption by men in online sexual chat rooms was the way in which the consumption itself appeared to function as the main target of libidinal investment. For those men—exhibitionists and voyeurs at once—it was the collective and collectively eroticised consumption of drugs that had brought them together by digital means.

A lot has been written—in both academic titles and popular media—about contemporary patterns of sex and drug use amongst gay men. Amongst those, the dominant cultural responses to sexualised drug use have tended to pathologise it, supporting sexual and/or moral panic responses to it. This has led, at worse, to blanket condemnations of chemsex or, at best, to holistic harm-reduction strategies developed and promoted by sexual health services such as London's 56 Dean Street, which started offering a specialist chemsex advice service in 2011 that soon became a reference in European responses to sexualised drug use among MSM. Yet, David Stuart, the chemsex lead at 56 Dean Street, has himself not always helped de-escalating and adding nuance to how mainstream culture understands chemsex. He has mostly defined the practice through negative affects, as a "medicating of complex issues that inhibit the enjoyment of gay sex such as societal internalised homophobia, the impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic within gay cultures, and religious or cultural shame that is often associated with gay sex" (Stuart, 2018).

In this article, however, I would like to offer a more capacious reading of chemsex, one that "destabilises" dominant perceptions (Drysdale et al., 2020) by becoming more attuned to the positive, life-affirming affects that can constellate around the conjugation of sex and drugs. In so doing, I aim to contribute to a growing number of cultural and critical analyses of the phenomenon by considering the role that chemsex, in both its imaginary and its material dimensions, may play amongst gay men as a form of subcultural reproduction, one that cannot be exhausted by extant attempts to reduce it to a self-harming practice driven by low self-esteem, internalised homophobia, or by the equally negative psychoanalytical readings that associate it with self-shattering jouissance and the death drive (see, for instance, Bourseul, 2017; Grégoire, 2016; Longstaff, 2019; Milhet, 2019). I will draw from histories and anthropologies of drug use, attending to the ontic instability of the term "drug," and from recent research in Science and Technology Studies that highlights the affirmative ways in which drug use—whether licit or

illicit—can creatively and positively affect bodies and subjectivities, and help make lives more liveable through a creative modulation of queer bodies, pleasures, and subjectivities. In reading subcultural reproduction into chemsex practices, my aim is to trouble dominant cultural narratives of the phenomenon by deploying affirmative affects, usually associated with survival and reproduction, and attaching them to sex and/on drugs understood as a strategy of queer subcultural reproduction and survival that ensures the maintenance of transhistorical kinship bonds between queers past and present in their shared becoming towards more capacious possible futures. With this, however, my intentions are not to wash away the negative or life-impairing experiences of some drug users. Rather, my aim is merely to try to develop a more generous and nuanced understanding of how queer people do drugs and/with sex, one that does not simply resort to the straightforwardly pathologising readings of the phenomenon which have historically tended to present drug use as a problem of individual subjects lacking in agency and autonomy set against the drugs that control every aspect of their lives. Against such positions, I want to entertain the possibility of there being a positive value in queer ways of living-with and becoming-with drugs, a value that can be at least as much life-affirming as it is often assumed to be simply life-negating.

The term "chemsex" gained prominence in the UK after the publication of *The Chemsex Study* (Bourne et al., 2014). The study, the first of its kind in the UK, was led by the Sigma Research Group at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and commissioned by the London boroughs of Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham with the aim of understanding the prevalence of sexualised drug use amongst local gay and bisexual men in their communities, and of developing strategies to minimise its negative public health and social impacts. While the report offered a very clear picture of the phenomenon in London as being one of a small scale that mostly included men who did not think of themselves as having "a problem with their use of drugs;" who had developed strategies to manage their consumption through controlled dosing or limited engagement; and who were welcoming of information on harm reduction (69), the study eventually reached readers beyond its originally intended local authority readership, leading to a series of mainstream sexual panic news stories that tended to paint a picture of a London gay community on the precipice, heading fast towards an abyss of collective self-destruction. Yet, as Jamie Hakim (2019, 2020) has convincingly argued, that newly coined practice of chemsex can only be properly understood as a "conjuncturally specific manifestation of [. . .] long-standing historical tensions [. . .] intensified during neoliberalism's struggle for hegemony in the UK," including those between public and private space in the context of gentrification, the fast-changing architectural shape of our cities, patterns of migration, and the tension between individualism and collectivity that have marked the history of both LGBTQ+ intimacies and politics (2019: 5).

The modern histories of drugs, drug use, addiction, and the "war on drugs" have always been deeply political ones, having become battlefields inseparable from developing modern Western ideals of the body, subjectivity, autonomy and

political agency under capitalism in both its liberal and neoliberal formations. Whilst exhaustively mapping those histories lies beyond the scope of this article, noting some of their main tenets remains important if we are to better conceptualise what we've come to know as chemsex, its associated moral, sexual, and technological panics, and the biopolitical paradigms governing the vast majority of legal, public health, and sexual health responses to it. Led by attempts to, at once, ensure population health and protect as much as possible the ideals of autonomy, individual agency and free will that have been so fundamental to the reproduction of neoliberal rationality as embodied in the figure of the *homo economicus,* public health and legal responses to drug use have always inhabited a space of tension. Rather than being at odds with the logics of the *homo economicus* understood as the subject whose whole life is governed by economic principles of individual profit, private accumulation, free consumption and competition, such tension between protecting freedoms and disciplining bodies into health is at the core of neoliberalism as one of its most fundamentally constitutive contradictions. As Michel Foucault (2008) had already noted:

> The new governmental reason needs freedom therefore, the new art of government consumes freedom. It consumes freedom, which means that it must produce it. It must produce it, it must organize it. The new art of government therefore appears as the management of freedom, not in the sense of the imperative: "be free," with the immediate contradiction that this imperative may contain. The formula of liberalism is not "be free." Liberalism formulates simply the following: I am going to produce what you need to be free. I am going to see to it that you are free to be free. And so, if this liberalism is not so much the imperative of freedom as the management and organization of the conditions in which one can be free, it is clear that at the heart of this liberal practice is an always different and mobile problematic relationship between the production of freedom and that which in the production of freedom risks limiting and destroying it. (63–64)

Therein lies one of the many reasons why drugs became such modern Western obsession warranting the surveillance (by both the police and clinical professionals), diagnosis, treatment, and/or punishment of those who use them. That is, whilst choosing to take drugs could be seen as an enactment of free will and thus as an actualisation of the liberal autonomous subject, its consequences—the consequences of such freedom—are seen to trigger a negative feedback loop which will limit the very same freedom and autonomy of the very same individuals caught exercising them. Contradictory indeed. Just like sexuality itself, which according to Foucault (1978) had also become a fundamental locus of the truth of modern subjects whilst being simultaneously a deeply policed facet of life, drug use, too, appears to have become a lived aporia, a practice through which the modern autonomous subject can simultaneously enact and undo itself, at once come into being and self-disintegrate or—better still—come into being whilst self-disintegrating. The problems drugs pose to neoliberal rationality are, therefore,

fundamentally tied to the paradigms of freedom, choice, and autonomy that sustain the subjectivity of the *homo economicus*. Whilst, as Toby Seddon (2010) noted, "drug-taking can be understood as one sphere of consumer activity which fulfils this role of identity formation through consumer choice"—indeed fitting "perfectly with the consumer ethic" of neoliberalism—addiction has nonetheless been understood as an instance in which subjects are "unable to exercise properly their freedom of choice" (128). In other words, "their personal agency or autonomy is undermined in such a way as to threaten their freedom as a consumer" (128), the very same freedom that nonetheless also framed their "choice" to consume drugs in the first place. It was this conundrum that led to the various iterations of the "war on drugs" that has been ongoing and developing since the late 1800s (Parascandola, 1995; Seddon, 2010) in an attempt to distinguish between substances taken as (medical) "necessity" and those that constitute a (dangerous) consumer "lifestyle" (Race, 2009: 6). As a result, a border between the autonomous and productive good subject of neoliberalism on the one hand and its addicted counterpart on the other had to be not only clearly laid out but also highly policed. As Claire Rasmussen (2011) stated when discussing the "war on drugs," "in order to be viewed as an autonomous subject, certain choices must be forbidden. The subject must be, in some sense, addicted to autonomy in a continual willingness to self-govern and remain a good subject" (63). This results in the abjection and demonisation of the "drugged-out consumer," that "poignant counterpoint to conceptions of agency in the expanding force-field of consumption and mass communication" (Race, 2009: 74).

Yet, it would be useful to remember that, whilst mind-altering substances have been consumed throughout the whole of human history, the notions of "drug," "narcotics," and "addiction" are modern creations, having emerged in the context of the Industrial Revolution and Western capitalism. They also lack ontic stability, being deeply contingent on the histories of the cultures in which they are produced and circulate as part of a diversity of regulatory legal and medical apparatuses (Race, 2009; Rasmussen, 2011; Seddon, 2010; Sherratt, 2005). As Dave Boothroyd (2006) claimed, "ideas about drugs, as much as the uses that have been made of them, have been decisive in the formation of specific cultures through the ages" (10), meaning that "even ideas of what may or may not be regarded as a "drug" in the first place are ultimately subject to culturally specific epistemologies, taxonomies, conceptual frameworks and so forth" (13). As it had been the case with pornography, our cultural understanding of the term "drug" first emerged in regulatory documents produced by modern nation-states in a biopolitical attempt to legislate, regulate, and manage the life of their populations. Like "porn," "drug" is thus primarily a legal category. Like porn, it is understood to lead to the moral decay of society and to hinder the autonomy of individuals through impairing their free will by means of a set of symptoms the 1900s diagnosed as "addiction." This led to both drugs and porn being at the centre of many of the moral panics and culture wars that have been ongoing since the second half of the 20th century. Whilst a whole set of substances with psychoactive properties are either freely

consumed in contemporary Western societies (e.g. coffee, tea, chocolate), vaguely regulated (e.g. alcohol, tobacco), or accessible through medical prescriptions (e.g. morphine, sertraline, codeine, methylphenidate, dextroamphetamine, benzodiazepines, etc.), the sale and consumption of others tend to still be criminalised in the vast majority of contemporary states (e.g. tetrahydrocannabinol, methamphetamine, γ-hydroxybutyric acid, cocaine, heroin, etc.).

The move towards criminalisation of the sale and/or consumption of some psychoactive substances—one that started brewing in the late 1800s with the creation of the new category of "dangerous drug" and was then marked, since the late-20th century, by the progressive development and implementation of strict treatment protocols and increasingly tougher criminal laws (Parascandola, 1995; Seddon, 2010)—was therefore a deeply political and cultural one, driven not only by emerging concerns with protecting the idealised autonomy of the modern liberal subject as both citizen of a polity and standing reserve of labour- and consumer power, but also by the rising fears that perceived threats of foreign invasion started triggering in the modern imaginary. Those fears manifested themselves in two main ways: first, the fear that the incorporation of substances seen to not "belong" in the body would threaten the survival of individual bodies; second, the fear that national borders porous to the inward movement of increasing numbers of foreign migrant workers in the context of a developing global capitalist market could threaten the body politic of the nation (Dufourmantelle, 2013; Gatens, 1996; Rasmussen, 2011). As such, the various national iterations of the "war on drugs" were part of a wider immunological response that aimed to protect the body—both individual and national—ensuring its self-sameness and continued reproduction.

Given its development as an attempt to defend the identity of the body against intruders, it is unsurprising that understandings of what constitutes or not a drug—of what substances are allowed to be consumed and of those that aren't—have historically been part of an assemblage of institutions, power, knowledge, practices, affects, identities and technologies that has worked to both produce and reproduce the hegemonic modern Western subject and its culture by immunising it against "foreign influence and political subversion" (Rasmussen, 2011: 74). The fight against drugs has thus always been historically inseparable from racism and attempts to control subordinated groups perceived to pose a threat to the order of the body politic, just like drugs are seen to pose a threat to the autonomy of our individual bodies. Through, for instance, the historical association of opium with Chinese communities in the USA, of crack cocaine with African-American communities, of methamphetamine with the working classes and the queers, drugs and drug addiction have taken up an important place in our cultural imaginary, being the substances teenagers are supposedly offered at school by those wanting to corrupt their bodies and morals, and the substances taken by subordinated communities purportedly with the intent of destroying the harmony of the nation.

Yet, if the decision to take recreational drugs can be framed within the neoliberal logic of consumer choice (Race, 2009; Seddon, 2010), and if contemporary identities are primarily shaped through patterns of taste (Bourdieu, 1984) and "distinctive rituals of consumption" (Hebdige, 2002: 103; see also Bennett, 2011; Ulusoy and Fırat, 2018; Weinzierl and Muggleton, 2003), patterns and cultural contexts of drug use should—as much or even more than drugs themselves—be seriously taken into account as central to the formation not only of modern subjectivities but also of (sub)cultural identities (Goulding et al., 2009; Thornton, 1995). As Kane Race (2009) noted, the distinction between "good" drugs consumed out of medical necessity and those "bad" drugs seen to be taken purely as "lifestyle," "gets mapped onto lives and identities in culturally consequential ways" (6). That is true whether we are talking about—say—*d*-amphetamine taken by middle-class students in US Ivy League universities to excel at their studies or methamphetamine taken by queers to amplify, tune, and modulate their sexual pleasures and experiences. The difference between those two examples has less to do with differences in the chemistry or pharmacology of the substances being consumed (Kirkpatrick et al., 2012) and more to do with the specific cultural contexts of consumption—the assemblages of human and nonhuman, biological, technological and symbolic bodies that coalesce in each instance of drug-taking, leading to rather different judgements of value being made of each drug as well as of those consuming them.

Insisting on the ways in which contemporary identities and cultures are shaped and modulated primarily through patterns of consumption and consumer cultures, however, should not be interpreted as an attempt to devalue or diminish said identities and cultures (see Gelder, 2007; Hebdige, 2002; Thornton, 1995; Weinzierl and Muggleton, 2013). After all, whilst the members of one of the consumer groups mentioned in the example above remain highly valued as legitimate social actors within the dominant culture, the others continue to be seen as problematic, engaging in patterns of drug taking that are seen to be abject. Yet, drugs and drug consumption play an important role in the "lifestyles" of both. Further, as Race (2009) warned us, whilst we may share concerns with regard to the limitations of identity politics as they have been shaped through neoliberal rationality and consumer culture, that mustn't mean we may discredit the identities or struggles of subordinated groups. Instead, "there is something worth retrieving about the emphasis on embodied pragmatics that the politics of consumption has helped to bring into focus," something of the order of a "politics of experience" that can help us understand "how, against the odds of mass cultural atomization, popular histories are transmitted, lived, and recognized as a basis for action and contest [. . .] that continue to pose considerable challenges to the terms of power" (75). It is only by attending to those practices and contexts of drug consumption, as well as to their histories, that we will be able to understand drug use (and the seemingly never-ending "war" on it) in a more capacious manner: not simply as the individual behaviour of a broken subject but as a constitutive and rather meaningful part of cultures themselves, one that has the ability to assemble "fragments of

subjectivity" (Duff, 2014: 127). In so doing, we may be able to see drugs being used to open up horizons of heterotopic possibility (Foucault, 1986) within a dominant rationality and cultural system that continue to aim at the destruction of drug cultures despite having created the conditions for their sedimentation in the first place. Only in pursuing that kind of work, will we be able to

> illustrate how cultural formations, practices, habits and events can be viewed in terms of their articulation by drugs, and how theoretical investigations and representations of a specific element of culture such as 'drug use' and a range of cultural phenomena and forms co-articulate one another. Work in this tradition contributed greatly to the critical displacement of the rhetoric of 'deviance' in the sociological representation of drug use in favour of a more sophisticated critical thinking which regards drug culture as expressive of social meaning. (Boothroyd, 2006: 6)

It is in line with that kind of work which sees drug culture as expressive of social meaning that I would like to attend to the history of sexualised drug use amongst gay men and to its affirmative affects. An approach of this kind allows us to frame chemsex as a practice that may be less (or not just?) about self-destruction or internalised homophobia as some public figures both straight and gay seem to believe, and more (but also?) about affirming and sustaining the life of a subculture, ensuring its reproduction not only through drug use but also through its associated ethics of experimentation and care.

Drug consumption amongst gay men in sexual contexts is nothing new. Drugs, in some form or another, have been a part of queer culture for a very long time, and are certainly present in a lot of 20th- and 21st-century queer cultural outputs. In literature, for instance, they appear alongside sex in authors like Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, Larry Townsend, Andrew Holleran, Larry Kramer, Monique Wittig, Samuel Delany, Mathieu Lindon, Guillaume Dustan, Érik Rémès, Al Berto, Pat Califia, Dennis Cooper, Ocean Vuong, or T. Fleischmann, amongst many others. They are there too in queer cinema, from Andy Warhol's *Chelsea Girls* (1996) to John Cameron Mitchell's *Shortbus* (2006); from Todd Verow's adaptation of Cooper's novel *Frisk* (1995) to Shu Lea Cheang's *Fluidø* (2017); from Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) to Ester Martin Bergsmark's *Something Must Break* (2014). Drug use was so quotidian in Warhol's Factory that, as Juan Suárez (2014) noted, "amphetamine certainly fuelled the energy and creativity of the two main groups that peopled the mid-1960's Factory—the "fags on speed" who gathered at the San Remo [. . .] and the college-educated Harvard/Cambridge set" (623). In pornography, too, drugs, whether legal or illegal, are often present explicitly or implicitly, from the regularly visible presence of bottles of amyl nitrate (also known as "poppers") being sniffed mostly by the bottoming models to relax the anal sphincter, to alcohol and cannabis. More recently, crystal methamphetamine has also started appearing or being alluded to in growing numbers of online amateur gay porn content uploaded to porn tube platforms or available live via video chatrooms such as the ones

described in the vignette with which I opened this article (see also Møller, 2020). Studios have also recently ventured into chemsex porn, for instance with Paul Morris's Treasure Island Media releasing Liam Cole's *Slammed* in 2012, a video that, whilst not explicitly depicting drug use, implies that the models had injected or "slammed" crystal methamphetamine before the cameras were switched on to film the sex we see on screen.

All the above offer only a few examples of the ways in which drugs have historically been part of the queer sexual imaginary of the 20th century and thus helped shape the 21st-century *chemsex imaginary*. In using the expression "chemsex imaginary," I am drawing from Charles Taylor's (2004) work on modern social imaginaries, as well as from Travis Linnemann's (2016) development of Taylor's term into the notion of "methamphetamine imaginary." For Taylor (2004), social imaginaries are the sets of ideas embedded in society which are made up of the meanings specific groups of actors ascribe to their repertoires of shared social practices and, therefore, to their own social existence. Accordingly, "the methamphetamine imaginary encompasses the many ways in which methamphetamine mediates the social world—how individuals imagine themselves and their relations to one another through this particular drug" (Linnemann, 2016: 5). One of the most immediate consequences of foregrounding social imaginaries is that, as Taylor (2004) reminds us, their social embeddedness is deeply connected to identity, that is, "the contextual limits to the imagination of the self" (62–63). As he puts it, "what we see in human history is ranges of human practices that are [. . .] at once [. . .] material practices carried out by human beings in space and time, [. . .] and at the same time, self-conceptions, modes of understanding" (31).

Like all subcultures, chemsex cultures are social worlds brought together not only through shared consumer choices, language and rituals but also through shared spaces (whether virtual or physical) and narrations about themselves. As social worlds, subcultures come into being as heterotopias through processes of creative self-imagination, self-distinction, and self-realisation (Gelder, 2007). Chemsex imaginaries in particular constitute for themselves a form of what Oliver Davies (2018) called a "queer pharmatopia," a heterotopia mediated by drugs which "bring a heightened sensual experience of corporeality and enable meaningful erotic encounters which overstep participants' usual sense of their own sexual identity or orientation" (176). That is, chemsex imaginaries mediate a series of amateur pharmacopornographic (Preciado, 2013) body practices, rituals and semiotic regimes, and bring them together as an *ars erotica* (Foucault, 1978: 57) capable of meaningfully forging new pleasures, new experiences of embodiment and, ultimately, new modes of "self-fashioning beyond the circuits of authorized expert knowledge" (Davis, 2018: 177). Granted, the specific, highly-mediated and complex nature of 21st-century chemsex imaginaries has indeed marked chemsex as different from earlier forms of sexualised drug use amongst queer folk—at the level of how it has been named, individuated and narrated as a practice, both within the subculture and across mainstream media. Yet, isolating chemsex as an exceptional practice deprived of antecedents and history risks overlooking

the continuities between past and present forms of sexualised drug use. This is important because it is through exploring those continuities that we can better grasp not only the reproduction of cultures of sex and/on drugs, but also how they may have changed alongside changes in sex media and cultures, regulatory juridical and health regimes, paradigms of health and illness, autonomy and freedom. To use a viral metaphor, it is the mutation of sexualised drug cultures and of their imaginaries that indeed ensures their replication and survival through time.

Narrowing down on that relationship between chemsex imaginaries and queer identities allows us to better understand histories of sexualised drug use amongst gay men in a more holistic manner as part of the history of a subculture, that is, of a cultural formation that is marked by a "set of shared discourses, social languages, values and ideologies" (Souleymanov et al., 2020: 17) as well as by specific meaningful rituals of drug consumption that can be traced back to at least the early years of the AIDS epidemic (Frederick and Perrone, 2014; see also Race, 2009). As Frederick and Perrone (2014) have argued, one of the biggest failures of the U.S. "drug war" is that it has repeatedly failed to approach drug use through a subcultural framework, therefore ignoring the role of drugs in shaping the social imaginaries and, consequently, the self-conceptions of users. Instead, it has preferred to see drug consumption as a failure of individual subjects marked by a deficit of autonomy, as already argued above. The consequences of that, when it comes to gay men and chemsex, are that a subculture already stigmatised was further alienated by state legislation and public health responses to drugs and sex (Frederick and Perrone, 2014) and denied the privilege of having a cultural history of its own that unfolded alongside and in relation to hegemonic histories.

Recent research, however, has pointed to the importance of accounting for the possible multitude of positive effects and affirmative affects that encounters with drugs can catalyse in the lives of individuals. As Fay Dennis (2019) has convincingly argued, the dominant models of addiction—regardless of whether they approach drug use as self-medication, choice, or disease—fail to "take seriously the vast array of life-affirming reasons why people use drugs" whilst relying on an understanding of "the self as distinct from the non-human other" (125). Veering away from conceptions of drug use as being always-already about a failed or pathological relationship between a human subject (the drug user) and a non-human object (the drug), Dennis proposes that we approach bodies and, by extent, subjectivities as "something that we do" (125), therefore inviting us to think the intra-acting enmeshment of human and non-human matter in the becoming of bodies, subjects, and lives. In her words:

> There is no outside and inside that is not made and therefore we cannot start from the premise of subjects or bodies as separate from objects or medicine. The fact that everyone is in a constant state of self-medication, incorporating and excorporating, in becoming more or less active (affected and affecting), renders the concept moot. Such a concept of human life can also lead to a radical de-pathologisation of drug use

> without disposing of the fact that not all encounters [with drugs] are good. (Dennis, 2019: 125)

Resonating with Dennis's research, as well as with Oliver Davis's work on "queer pharmatopia," Kiran Pienaar, Dean Murphy, Kane Race, and Toby Lea have recently drawn attention to the ways in which queer folk use drugs as "technologies of the self" (Pienaar et al., 2020). Building on semi-structured interviews with 42 people who self-identified as LGBTQ in Victoria and New South Wales, Australia, the authors claimed that "sexualised drug use was valued for its potential to generate new ways of relating to sexual partners, to facilitate particular sexual practices that might otherwise be uncomfortable or even unthinkable, and to experiment with what the body can do" (4). In that way, drugs played an important role in modulating what the authors call "'sexual architectures': the erotic relations, emotions, practices, spaces and meanings that jointly constitute the sexual experience" (4). Furthermore, "for many of [their] participants their experiences with drugs effectively produced them as different kinds of subjects, transforming them from members of stigmatised minorities to agentive, desiring socio-sexual subjects," leading the authors to claim that drugs can be understood as technologies that enable the production and affirmation of both queer subjects and queer communities (7). Recognising those entanglements of human and non-human matter in the becoming-queer of subjects makes it "possible to identify and foster the logics of care, safety and pleasure that are immanent, but all too often overlooked, within these cultures" (7; see also Race, 2008, 2009).

Following the above, and drawing from Silvan Tomkins's claim that "I am, above all, what excites me" (2008, 191), I would argue that sexualised drug consumption amongst queer folk can function as a kind of pedagogy of the self that is structured and mediated subculturally through chemsex imaginaries. Highlighting this pedagogical aspect of chemsex subcultures allows us to better take into account the ways in which sexualised drug use may catalyse positive affects that affirm the lives of queer subjects instead of reading it simply as a set of always-already negative and self-hindering encounters. If, as Pienaar et al. (2020) argue, "drugs are not only consumed by individual subjects, but are active in materialising these subjects" (2), one can start accounting for "the possibility that drug consumption practices may be an important modality for enacting new subjectivities, particularly ones that depart from intelligible, disciplinary forms" (2). In that context, it is not only vital to stress the "intra-action" (Barad, 2007) of drugs and bodies in the becoming of queer subjects and in their own survival *qua* queer subjects, but it is also crucial to take into account the role that sexualised drug use, in its capacity as a pedagogy of the self, has played in the historical reproduction and survival of queer subcultures themselves. In order to expand on that point, I would like to draw from Pierre Bourdieu's work on cultural reproduction.

Approaching social formations as systems of power relations, in their book *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, Bourdieu and Passeron (1990)

highlight the role that institutionalised educational systems play in the reproduction of the social system of which they are part by means of pedagogical work that reproduces the dominant cultural arbitrary. As they write:

> Every institutionalized educational system (ES) owes the specific characteristics of its structure and functioning to the fact that, by the means proper to the institution, it has to produce and reproduce the institutional conditions whose existence and persistence (self-reproduction of the system) are necessary both to the exercise of its essential function of inculcation and to the fulfilment of its function of reproducing a cultural arbitrary which it does not produce (cultural reproduction), the reproduction of which contributes to the reproduction of the relations between the groups or classes (social reproduction). (54)

The pedagogical work carried out by institutionalised educational systems reproduces social relations through ensuring a continued distinction amongst classes defined through the different degrees to which they accumulate different kinds of capital—economic, social, and cultural—and whose identity is shaped, performed, and given intergenerational continuity thanks to the learning of class habitus (Bourdieu, 1984). Pedagogy is not, therefore, of exclusive benefit to individuals but it is also fundamental to social and cultural reproduction. This is also the case when it comes to subcultures and their reproduction. Subcultural formations, too, are produced and reproduced through the sharing of experiences, patterns of consumption, spaces, argot and rituals, as well as peer-to-peer—or consumer-to-consumer—engagement and learning (Goulding et al., 2013; Ulusoy and Schembri, 2018). Whilst subcultural forms of pedagogy, subjectivities, and feelings of belonging may require a sense of separation or distinction from the dominant culture, they often also occur through processes of appropriation and re-signification of elements of the culture against which they nonetheless distinguish themselves (Chambers, 1994; Coates et al., 2010; Williams, 1989; Williams and Donnelly, 1985).

To go back to the examples of methamphetamine and *d*-amphetamine given above, one could argue that the existing radical distinction made between the two drugs and their users is not based on the chemistry or pharmacology of either but, instead, on the kinds of social relations and subjectivities their distinctive cultures of consumption reproduce, as well as the different value assigned to each of them within the dominant culture. Whilst the first pattern of drug use contributes to the reproduction of the dominant social order and of its hegemonic subjectivities, the second ensures the reproduction of subcultural formations and of the subjectivities they constitute and validate. What are two very similar drugs when it comes to their chemistry and pharmacology acquire two radically-different sets of cultural meanings and value on the grounds of the distinctiveness of their individual contexts and patterns of consumption, as well as the different cultures and

subjectivities they are seen to reproduce. As Erik Hannerz noted in his study of punk subcultures:

> The authentication of styles and identities thus involves enacting a subcultural background text through the linking of scripts to patterned sets of meanings within which objects are performed and validated as part of the subcultural, accounting for both similarities and differences, as well as subcultural reproduction and change. The point here is that objects [such as drugs, in this case] are not meaningful s*ui generis*, but rather they become meaningful through these deep structures of meaning. (Hannerz, 2015: 34)

If, in the case of *d*-amphetamine taken by college students, what is being reproduced are subjectivities grounded on the pursuit of productivity, profit, and self-entrepreneurialism, methamphetamine consumed by gay men during days-long group sex marathons catalyses the production and reproduction of bodies that both depend on and veer away from neoliberal rationality and subjectivities. That is, both cultures of drug use share with one another their dependence on patterns of consumption and reward, as well as the pursuit of individual pleasure—the "work hard, play harder mentality" that made the logics of work so pervasive in spaces of leisure that work and entertainment, including licit or illicit drug use, have ended up today as two sides of the same neoliberal coin (De Sutter, 2018). Yet, chemsex subcultures, their imaginaries and sexual scripts (Simon and Gagnon, 1986, 2003) can also disrupt hegemonic understandings of the male body and of the liberal subject, whose conception as an autonomous self-enclosed unit was central to the development of bourgeois subjectivity and neoliberal rationality (De Beistegui, 2018; Mosse, 1996; Rasmussen, 2011; Shildrick, 2002). It does so by eroticising the body's porosity to foreign matter (Florêncio, 2020a) and by opening it to queer experiences of ecstatic time that are no longer connected with productivity, profit, or sexually-reproductive futurism (Florêncio, 2020b; Halberstam, 2005; Muñoz, 2009; Scott, 2015). In so doing, the subcultural subjectivities chemsex reproduces throw a spanner in the works of the normative chronobiopolitics of heteropatriarchal culture (Freeman, 2010, 2019; Luciano, 2007).

In taking into account the role chemsex plays in queer subcultural reproduction, we will also be able to simultaneously locate and highlight the practices and pedagogies of care circulating within those cultures and work to ensure they too are reproduced. Practices of care, for instance, like the ones identified by Oliver Davies (2018) in his discussion of the passages of Mathieu Lindon's autobiography in which Lindon wrote about the episodes of sex and drug-taking involving himself and Michel Foucault, whom Lindon saw as both a queer father and a teacher in, amongst other things, matters of drugs and sex. Davis notes how those episodes of sex and drug taking often involved the sharing of the participants' experiences of

the different drugs they'd taken, as well as the "pairing" of drugs with different kinds of music and films in what constituted "a carefully structured collective and communicative encounter with sublimated objects of aesthetic culture [which de-dramatised] the substances involved, detaching them from their far more familiar abject contexts in mainstream addiction discourse" (174). Another example would be my own experience of the event "Let's Talk About Sex & Drugs," which I attended in July 2019 whilst carrying out archival and fieldwork research in Berlin. Organised by the promoters of the queer club night Buttons in the garden of the collective-run club about:blank, the afternoon event included a delicious pay-what-can barbecue and a frank, open, and non-judgmental discussion chaired by a drag queen and a queer doctor in which the audience—diverse in genders and age groups—was able to ask questions about sexualised drug use, harm reduction, what to do (and what never to do) when someone overdoses on specific drugs, as well as share experiences of both what they enjoyed about drugs and sex and what worried them. Also present at the event were various queer community organisations giving away free kits for safer use of drugs such as GHB, cocaine, or crystal methamphetamine. It is these kinds of amateur pharmacological knowledge exchange, already happening and being reproduced intergenerationally within queer communities—a kind of exchange that values the life-affirming effects drugs can have in terms of creative experimentation with bodies, pleasures, and subjectivities—that, as Race (2008) noted, is often absent from institutional responses to chemsex, even when those are guided by harm-reduction paradigms.

It is due to its function as a form of pedagogy that ensures the reproduction and survival of a queer subculture, that chemsex should to be approached not simply as a life-hindering practice but also as a life-affirming culture. In ensuring the reproduction and survival of queer bodies and ways of living, chemsex cultures and their imaginaries also ensure the very survival of the subcultural subjectivities of queer folk who participate in them, as Pienaar et al. (2020) have shown. Approaching chemsex cultures in such way will allow both researchers and clinicians to develop more capacious protocols to deal with any potential negative consequences of drug use and addiction without overlooking the life-affirming value—sometimes very much life-saving value—that chemsex can have in the lives of those who partake in it. In so doing, discourse on sexualised drug use can better acknowledge the subcultural dimensions and value of the latter and, through that, move beyond paradigms of individual or societal pathology such as the ones embodied in the "war on drugs," focusing instead on fostering the ethics of care that is already often found within chemsex subcultures themselves.

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