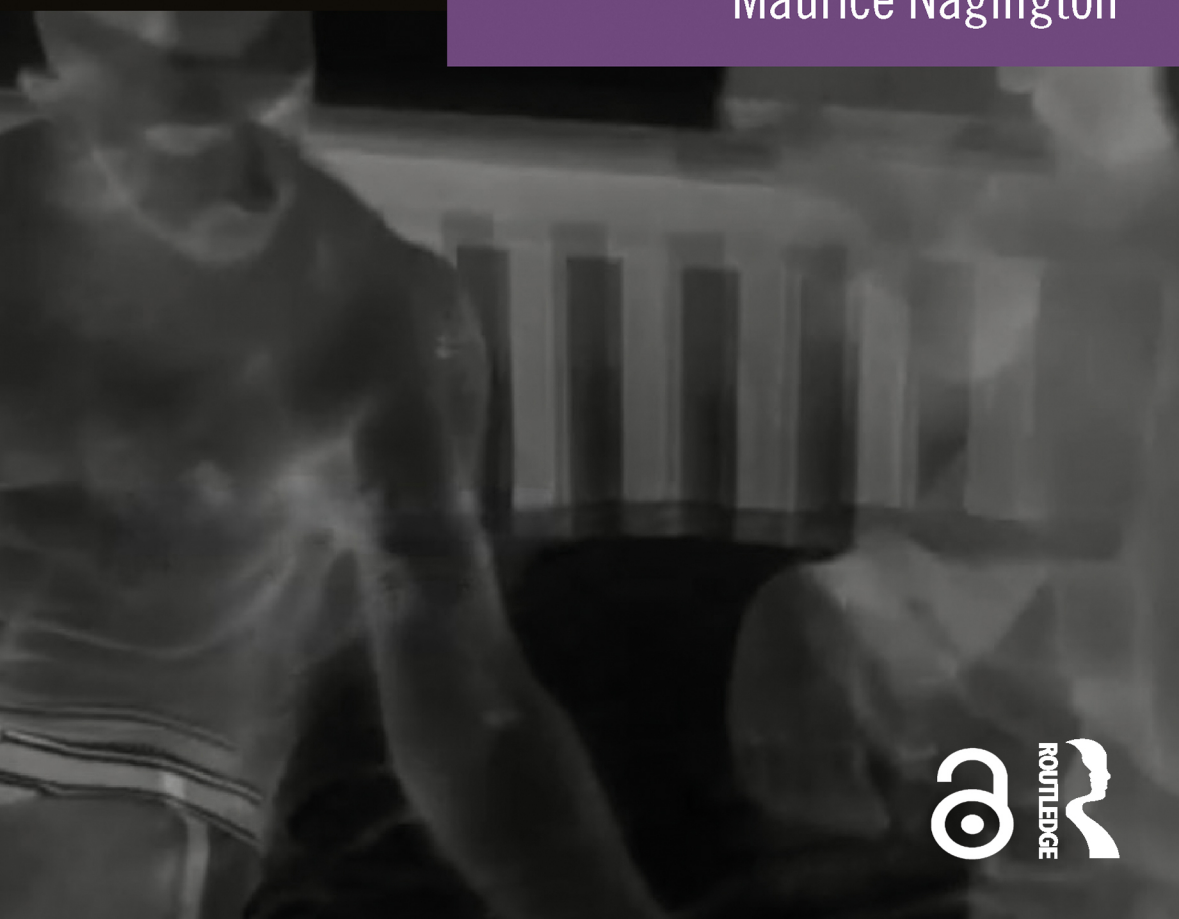
SEXUALITY, CULTURE AND HEALTH

# THE MORAL LESSONS OF CHEMSEX

## A CRITICAL APPROACH

Maurice Nagington



ROUTLEDGE

Nagington has produced a text that thus far has been sorely lacking in the chemsex literature; one that fundamentally rejects the pathologising and moralising sentiment that has dominated writing on this topic to date. His book uses chemsex as a case study to address a key philosophical question, 'how can we have more liveable and viable lives?' In doing so, he allows space to interrogate dominant narratives of trauma, risk, and destruction. A thoughtful, enticing, and theory-based exploration of the musicality of chemsex further adds to the novelty of this book and encourages the reader to truly expand their thinking beyond the common tropes that befall this topic – and instead understand chemsex in terms of pleasure rather than fear.

**Professor Adam Bourne,** *Director of Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University*

Nagington's compelling discussion of chemsex takes us on a critical journey through the debates that have attended its emergence, its representation in a variety of cultural forms, from documentary to pornography, as well as fascinating accounts that participants themselves provide of their experiences. Ultimately, he recognises a positive potential in the physical relations chemsex facilitates, without denying the dangers and dissatisfactions that some would like us to believe exhaust its significance. Not the least of the book's achievements, though, is its focus on the Manchester, rather than London, scene and the quite distinctive spatial and social relations that characterise it. Chemsex emerges from this essential account by turns demystified, humanised, localised, and theorised.

**David Alderson**, *Professor of Literary and Cultural Studies, University of Manchester*

Grounded in generous conversations with chemsex practitioners, *The Moral Lessons of Chemsex* develops a truly original, creatively theorised perspective on chemsex. For Nagington, chemsex raises the possibility of an ethics that emphasises our permeability and vulnerability to each other. The conception of "visceral solidarity" he develops on this basis is compelling and vital.

**Professor Kane Race**, *University of Sydney*

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# The Moral Lessons of Chemsex

This book explores how gay and bi men's lived experiences of chemsex intersect with its cultural representations. It argues that while normative moral frameworks are often used to talk about chemsex, chemsex sub-cultures contain their own valuable moral frameworks that can provide lessons about some of the most pressing concerns of contemporary society.

Drawing from a tradition of scholarship that views queer sub-cultures as having pedagogical value for all of society, Maurice Nagington critiques norms that govern lives in relation to: the interactions of bodies, sex and capitalism, trauma and tragedy, the regulation of boundaries, and the disciplinary apparatuses in modern society. Each chapter takes its lead from themes informed by the analysis of longitudinal interviews conducted over a two-year period by the author and an archive of materials concerning chemsex such as films, soundtracks, health promotion pamphlets, newspaper articles, blogs, and ethnographic field notes. Linking the accounts of interviewees to wider debates about and representations of chemsex, this innovative book develops a cohesive narrative about the moral lessons chemsex can teach us.

Contributing to the emerging field of critical chemsex studies, this volume is of interest to advanced students and scholars interested in gender and sexuality studies, sociology of health and illness, medical anthropology, critical public health, and criminology, as well as those who are involved in chemsex and wish to read and reflect about it as more than just a problem.



**Dr Maurice Nagington** is a lecturer in Health Sciences at The University of Manchester, UK. His research interests include the intersections of health and cultural analysis, with interests in chemsex, ethics, HIV, sexual health, COVID-19, and palliative care.

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# The Moral Lessons of Chemsex

## A Critical Approach

Maurice Nagington

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# Contents

# Figures

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Chapter 1

# "Morals are not exactly a priority"

## Morality and chemsex

In the film *Chemsex* directed by Gogarty and Fairman (2015), Matt Spike, a kink photographer, suggests that social media has introduced a number of men to chemsex who would have otherwise been naïve. Speaking of a specific website *NastyKinkPigs*, Spike says "the name says it all… morals are not exactly a priority". In making such a statement, chemsex becomes a negative space of morality, one where extensive and worried discussion about chemsex by outsiders attempts to fill the moral void that it has supposedly created. The vacuum is then filled from an imagined exteriority, one in which morality is a priority and from which the deviant gay man can learn the error of their ways.

This book argues that approaches to the morality of chemsex have been largely consistent in this regard. It is almost always viewed as something to moralise about, not with. However, there is a need to recognise the important lessons that chemsex can teach us about morality. Chemsex connects gay men in intimate, visceral, and pleasurable ways. Despite (extensive) arguments that it disconnects "us" from one another, it offers ways of imagining moral frameworks that can create a positive space for making lives more (not less) liveable, in ways that embrace rather than efface connectivity. This book traces this thesis through the complex relationships between the lived experiences of 20 gay men who had recent or ongoing experiences of chemsex, and the cultural representations that preceded and surrounded them. This introductory chapter reviews some of the most recent literature on chemsex, explains the methods used to gather and analyse the data used in this book, and introduces some of the key arguments that follow.

## On the lived experiences of chemsex

Interviews were the primary way I started to learn about and understand chemsex. Unlike many other studies, I decided against recruiting participants via sexual health services. I made this choice because most people only engage with healthcare services with regard to chemsex if they are experiencing problems, recruitment via sexual health clinics would have risked biasing the study towards this

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specific demographic that has already been well researched. Instead, I decided to recruit via one of the primary ways people organise chemsex, via the hookup app Grindr, and in April 2017, I made a profile (see Figures 1.1 and 1.2) asking for people to talk about chemsex. The profile was set up as an open invite to talk to me about chemsex; potential participants always made the first approach. The profile's GPS location was altered and placed throughout Greater Manchester on different days and at different times.

Seventeen guys agreed to take part via this route, and a further three were referred to me by word of mouth. For the next two and a half years, I met up with them on a semi-regular basis. The aim of the research was intentionally broad: to explore people's understandings of chemsex, using longitudinal interviews that allowed relationships, perspectives, and the research questions to develop iteratively.


*Figure 1.1* Main profile picture.

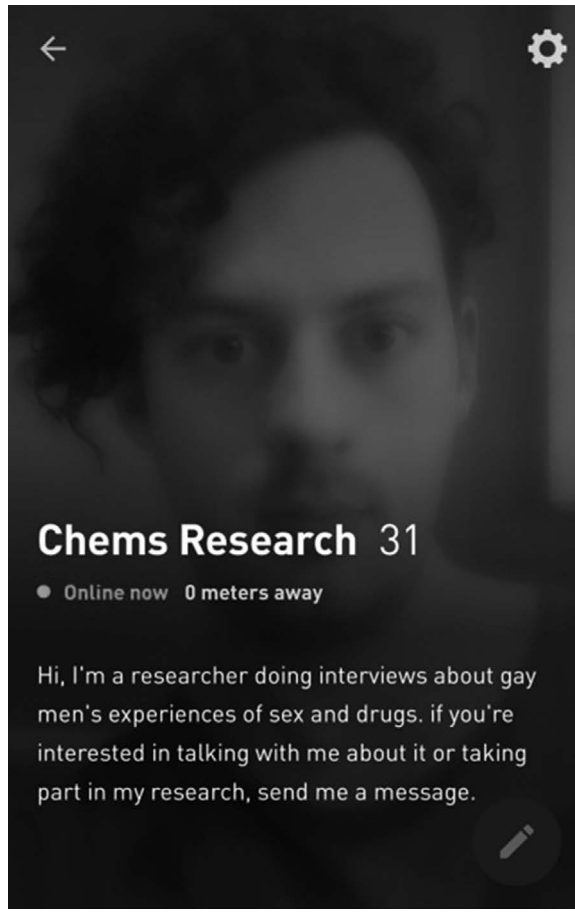


*Figure 1.2* Text on Grindr profile.

Prior to this, almost all research on chemsex had been cross-sectional and had occurred in cities such as London, Sydney, or New York. Doing longitudinal interviews in a smaller but vibrant city such as Manchester offered the potential for novel experiences and perspectives to develop and be more fully appreciated.

On average, the interviews lasted two hours each. Seven of the participants dropped out after the first interview (Bruno, Ray, Aahan, Seamus, Tyler, Barry, and Jacob), the rest of the participants completed two (Sam), three (John, Mark), or four (Andrew, Nathan, Charles, Robert, Ryan, Carl, Julian, Jack, James, Michael). Interviews were conducted by myself: a white, middle-class, cis-gendered gay man in his 30s who has grown up in and around the sub-culture of Manchester's queer community for two decades. Within Manchester's queer community, there is a well-established liberal approach to sex and drugs. Monogamy whilst practiced is

unusual, and drug use is something most people have at least some experience of, often in relation to the vibrant clubbing scene. Sex and drugs, whilst coming with their problems in this sub-culture, are widely recognised as coming with pleasures. As such, I am part of a sub-culture that does not approach sex and drugs from the prohibitionist logic that tends to pervade other sections of British society. However, whilst interviews are inevitably a co-construction, it is not my intention to foreground myself – there have been enough autobiographical stories written about chemsex – but where my own accumulated views or ideas clearly and significantly shaped participants' constructions of chemsex they are accounted for.

I met the men I talked with wherever they felt most comfortable which included coffee shops and pubs, my university office, and their own homes often over a shared meal. Each participant will be introduced as and when the need arises. In summary, their ages ranged from early 20s to late 50s, and the men came from a variety of social and economic backgrounds, and a range of ethnicities. Because of the relatively small community of men doing chemsex in and around Manchester, some small details are changed to maintain their confidentiality. When quoting participants and myself, italicised text is used. All other direct quotes use none-italicised text.

The experiences of participants were diverse, as were the interviews which ranged from raucous laughter to sombre discussions of trauma. There was also an erotic charge to at least some of the interviews, as Garcia-Iglesias (2021: pg 705) notes, whilst "research has at times acknowledged the presence of erotic charge, it has generally failed to consider the researcher as a subject of these emotions". An erotic charge became overt in at least two of the interviews with Sam, a 41-year-old White male working in an executive sales and marking role, and John a 35-year-old White male working in retail. For Sam, it was more a passing comment where he said, suggestively, "*I would love for you to experience it [chemsex]*". John was more direct, and it quickly became obvious that he had really only agreed to the interview in order to flirt with me. For example, when discussing what he enjoyed doing when on chems, he mentioned how he enjoyed using sex toys, to which he then extended the conversation to say "*I've got some toys at home actually, you'd love them, you would. You should grow your hair out as well…*". As Garcia-Iglesias suggests, such flirting can usually be dealt with by largely ignoring it or laughing it off and moving on the topic of the interview, in this case I responded with "*I've just had it cut a bit actually*". Regardless of the reasons why the men took part in the study, or dropped out, this book is hugely indebted to their contributions. Out of respect for the time the men gave me, they all feature in this book.

The interviews followed a loose semi-structured format, where during the initial interview, broad topics were covered such as learning about people's background, relationship status, and general hobbies and interests. We then generally moved on to why and how people did chemsex, what they saw as the risks and benefits as well as any effects on their mental, physical, and sexual health. Finally, the opening interview covered questions around whether they had seen any media representations of chemsex such as films and plays. The generally loose structure

meant conversations were able to drift onto other related topics such as clubbing or sociopolitical topics of the day. What quickly became apparent was that almost all the men spoke almost exclusively to me about chemsex, and had not spoken to others about their experiences and perspectives at all. Only two people Tyler, a young 21-year-old who was studying at university, and James (introduced later) had spoken to anyone else. Tyler had had a difficult time and had experienced an abusive relationship in which illicit drugs were used by an ex-partner to coerce and control him. His close friends, all straight, supported him and cared for him when he was struggling.

Whilst the personal experiences of the gay men are central to this book and served as a way to develop the themes addressed in subsequent chapters, as Fraser (2020) notes it is important not to be limited by the data that emerge out of qualitative research. Therefore, this book is not only about their individual experiences; instead, it recognises that "all datasets are constituted from historically and politically specific assumptions about objects of study and causal relations" (Fraser, 2020: pg 9). To interrogate these relations, participants' experiences are interpolated by data from an archive of materials stretching from the 1960s through to the present day, including films, novels, newspaper articles, ephemera, and my own autobiographical reflections. By reading experience alongside such cultural representations, the wide range of feelings and ideas which chemsex is shaped by and simultaneously evokes will be explored. I ultimately argue that chemsex is constantly transformed by and transformative of individuals, bodies, societies, cultures, and history. By exploring this, chemsex can become a case study to address one of moral philosophy's most contemporary problems as posed by Loizidou (2008: pg 145): namely, "how can we have more liveable and viable lives"? The conditions under which chemsex becomes liveable will be focused on in this book, but chemsex will also be examined for what it can tell us about how to make lives more liveable in the face of social conditions that push us to be increasingly isolated, productive, and self-disciplining subjects.

As should now be clear, this book is neither for nor against chemsex. Instead, it aims to weave its way through the pleasure, fear, anger, sorrow, trauma, and laughter which has animated both the interviews that took place here and broader responses to chemsex. In doing so, an analysis will be produced about chemsex which simultaneously critiques the culture that it is shaped by.

## Beginning chemsex

Knowing where to start such a wide-ranging analysis is tricky, yet one event stands out clearly as a stimulus for this book. In December 2013, I attended a talk by the late David Stuart on the 3rd December 2013 in a small hotel conference room in the northwest of England with about twenty other nurses who specialised in providing HIV care. Stuart worked at 56 Dean Street Sexual Health Clinic in Central London leading their work supporting people in relation to chemsex. Whilst memories of his talk are hazy, I remember Stuart describing the three key drugs

involved: "G, crystal meth and mephedrone" and linking their use by gay men with "internalised homophobia" who used hookup apps whilst implicating them in the continuing HIV pandemic. He was a compelling speaker, evangelical in tone and rhetoric, but also warm and welcoming to be with. However, it would be uncontroversial to say his ideological construction of chemsex verged on the polemic.

Stuart committed suicide on 24th October 2022, a huge loss for those to whom he offered extensive, kind and compassionate support, of which those who knew him universally speak. It is a loss that this book cannot be in a more direct dialogue with him and his constructions of chemsex. Critically, exploring his ideas is vital as they shaped the discourses that framed the interviews and many of the other cultural representations of chemsex over the past 10 years.

## Defining chemsex

Stuart's construction of chemsex in academic publications started around the same time I first heard him speak in 2013 and engaged with the same broad themes: internalised homophobia; HIV; specific drugs; and app-based hook-ups. The first of these, internalised homophobia is often used to explain why gay men indulge in chemsex (Stuart, 2016). It draws on a cannon of literature from the 1980s to describe the how homophobic constructions of the gay male "embellish superego functioning and, in this way, contribute to the propensity for guilt and intropunitiveness amongst homosexual males" (Malyon, 1982: pg 60). Stuart argues that gay men turn to illicit drugs (specifically ones which make the user feel a sense of euphoria) to overcome deep-set feelings of guilt about their sexuality so that they can have sex with other men. Evans (2019) argues that these pathological responses find their roots in a "slow drip trauma" (pg 40) and are exceptional to the gay male experience. Thus, they make the relationship between psychological morbidity and drug use unique to gay men. Yet, doing this fails to account for the fact that many other groups (such as women more generally) experience considerable background aggression and abuse, yet their drug use does not commonly become read as primarily (or at all) the pathological root cause of their problems in the same way that happens for gay men. It may therefore just be a matter of ideological perspective that suggests that the trauma of homophobia produces chemsex. Feminist and queer approaches are particularly helpful in critiquing and transforming such perspectives.

## Feminist and queer perspectives

Paul Preciado (2013: pg 256) has written: "as soon as a body abandons the practices that society deems masculine or feminine it drifts gradually towards pathology". Yet, conversely when society's structures break down, so too may the drift to pathology. As Azbel (2023) notes in their research with queer feminist collectives in Berlin during COVID-19 lockdowns, intimate rituals of drug use and sex developed allowing marginalised genders and sexualities to take central roles. Without the

structures of clubs that hitherto had often traded on hetero- and homonormative modes of gender and sexuality, intimate and elaborate new group drug consumption practices emerged, such as the communal administration of MDMA. Such gatherings centred femme, trans, and gender diverse experiences, challenged gender hierarchies, supported gender transitioning and produced a collective queer body whose practices well exceeded individual pleasure. Similarly, Pienaar et al. (2020) drawing on Foucault's work have examined how drugs as "technologies of the self" enable people to articulation new identities. Whilst not suggesting the production of a more collective queer body, Pienaar et al similarly conclude that drug use is not solely a response to marginalisation. Moyle et al.'s (2020) work, drawing on Preciado's work, examines how some women and non-binary people find drugs help them more easily mediate pleasurable experiences of sex and embodiment with others, despite these experiences being sometimes suffused with histories of trauma. Furthermore, Aldridge's (2020) work, drawing on Rubin's theories of the 'charmed circle', explores how sexualised drug use amongst a broader sample of genders is at least in part about identity formation through boundary setting. In their study, Aldridge notes that a wide range of drugs were used by participants, and in some cases, their use of drugs such as cannabis extended beyond sexual settings into people's daily lives. In other cases, drugs like MDMA weren't used in day-to-day life, but were used in non-sexual settings such as nightclub venues. However, in all cases, boundaries were constructed, with young people distancing themselves from people who (in their judgement) failed to control the drug use expertly. In doing so, a clear distinction was constructed between acceptable and deviant behaviour, and by extension those who they identified with or ejected from their social circle.

What all these analyses emphasise is that drug use can have transformative and reparative potentials and, as Malins (2004) notes, it is what drugs connect with and transform that is central to the analysis of drug cultures. Such narratives are frequently denied to gay men who are "so used to having their sex lives scrutinised and surveyed" (Kagan, 2018: pg 128) by criminal, health, and moral actors that it becomes almost axiomatic to understand the lives of gay men as objects of control and correction, rather than liberty and connection. Analyses informed by narcofeminist principles offer a way of not just representing experiences found in the feminist literature on drug use, but also reminding us that the objects of control can speak back (Dennis et al., 2023).

Narcofeminism stands resolutely alongside women with lived experience of drug use but refuses to easily resolve the meanings of it. It recognises that drugs shape and are shaped by selves, worlds, and social relations and that as such there is a minoritarian potential of drugs to disrupt dominant orders and create alternative modes of care and connection. What emerges out of this is a co-operative ethico-political project of worldbuilding, one that values the differences of drug-using women. Whilst the political possibilities of chemsex amongst gay men as a way of resisting the cultural hegemonies around chemsex have been theorised (Frederick, 2014), beyond the academic literature the construction of chemsex as anything

other than pathological is almost always mentioned as an afterthought rather than a premise that is rigorously explored to allow new conclusions to be reached. Importantly, whilst feminist and queer analyses of drug use acknowledge the complex, challenging, and even painful and traumatic contexts in which participants' lives may have been lived, they do not construct these reasons as the root causes for subcultural practices. Instead, such analyses serve to remind us that one does not need root cause explanations for social phenomenon that are as complex as drug use and experiences for gender and sexuality.

One of the key lessons from the above analyses is to view drug use as something with which other social phenomenon intersect, rather than attempt to find a deep-seated cause (such as internalised homophobia) to retrospectively explain that which has already been deemed immoral by historic association. The critical narratives developed by feminists towards drug use are therefore ontologically and politically important to understanding how gay men may more critically approach the narration of drug use, and what their lives can teach us about morality. This also stays true to Malyon's (1982) original cautioning to avoid using internalised homophobia as a singular explanation for the varied and various psychological discontents of gay men. The gay men interviewed for this book confirmed this cautionary approach, in that whilst some certainly experienced psychological morbidity, all but one did not identify the concept of internalised homophobia as a motivating factor for engaging in chemsex. Their reasons for doing or not doing chemsex were diverse and for some men, changed over time.

## HIV and chemsex

In discussions of chemsex, HIV is always nearby. Stuart (2013) suggests that this is a longstanding relationship and that whilst HIV and drugs are "no strangers to each other" (pg 6), chemsex was changing the relationship. This was primarily happening through a "proliferation" (Stuart, 2013: pg 6) of gay male sexuality using new technologies (such as Grindr) which had led to previous safe and secure "boundaries" (Stuart, 2013: pg 6) breaking down. The theme of HIV acting as a way to control and contain gay men's behaviour in relation to chemsex is explored more extensively in relation to the participants' experiences in the next chapter. However, it is important to stress at the start how such narratives galvanised the rhetoric that set the scene for all the interviews.

Stuart's (2014) article is the first one in which he starts to use language from the HIV epidemiological literature. Specifically, he states that chemsex is a "syndemic" (Stuart, 2014: pg 19), a term first coined by Singer (2000) to describe the synergistic epidemics that can arise in society, in this case substance abuse, violence, and AIDS, a phenomenon named SAVA. The intersections of these factors are important to highlight; however, the logical construction of syndemics often follows a familiar and somewhat problematic pattern. Firstly, with regard to SAVA commonly used illicit drugs are understood as being abused and then linked to research which correlated these drugs to violence. Since the development of the

concept, research has come to show that there are many pro-social aspects of illicit drug use such as dancing (Hunt et al., 2007; Measham et al., 2001), the formation of strong bonds and social identities (Aldridge, 2020; Becker, 1963), creative forms of solidarity (Azbel, 2023), challenging established patterns of gender and sexuality expression (Measham, 2002; Preciado, 2013), and extensive research that has shown how drug prohibition produces the violence that is identified as being caused by drugs (Werb et al., 2011). Following an orthodox, syndemic logic requires us to ignore these multi-faceted aspects of drugs and drug use; instead, we must read them as pathological. Drugs must always and already lack any positive potential for individuals, society, and culture. It also requires us to ignore the growing inadequacies of health services to provide for the needs of gay men (Nagington and King, 2022). For example, as Sam noted, "*I don't think chemsex is fuelling [the HIV epidemic] at all. It might be a contributor… because people lose their inhibitions… but we all know you can't get PrEP for free*[1]*, so why are we not looking at those wider elements of what's going on in people's lives… what makes it riskier?*". Whilst Stuart was a strong community advocate, his contouring of chemsex-as-pathology into clinical responses to HIV and STIs risks limiting the critical space for thinking about what chemsex is, and how "we" should respond (if at all) to "it".

## Chemsex, medicine, and self-control

Tracing how drug legislation in the 1970s shifted from focusing on drug dangers to pathological use, Race (2009) suggests the pathologisation of drug use revealed a new concern with self-conduct. It gives medicine a symbolic role as the measure of legitimate behaviour. Ultimately, Race argues that this obsession with drug control often distracts from material inequities and situated drug experiences. He argues that a more considered ethics of consumption is needed that acknowledges the role of drugs in self-creation. Linking his arguments to his own experiences of HIV activism and research Race (2017a, 2017b) argues that health is not just a matter of individual compliance with medical authority. Instead, he suggests health is most positively produced when agencies iteratively shape responses with community-level concerns and cultural sensibilities. Throughout all of this, there must also be recognition of how marginalised people often already care for one another so as to maintain safe(r) sexual and drug practices. It is important therefore to shift perspectives on drugs away from how they are constructed by medicine (as substances, which come with criteria for application, that produce knowable effects), to viewing them as part of a contextual, shifting, and even playful intermingling of subjects and events. A brief review of "the" drugs associated with chemsex is therefore important.

## The unholy trinity

Since the start of his writing Stuart has consistently identified three drugs as distinctively linked to and formative of chemsex, namely GHB (aka gamma-Hydroxybutyric acid or just "G") mephedrone (aka 4-methylmethcathinone or "mkat") and crystal

meth (aka methamphetamine hydrochloride, or "crystal", "meth", "T", or "Tina"). Aligning with the release of the film *Chemsex* in which Stuart plays a prominent role (analysed in more detail in subsequent chapters), Patrick Cash (2015) writes a long-form article for the gay lifestyle magazine *Attitude*. In it, Cash links three drugs to the "not infrequent" (pg 72) (though also not quantified) deaths of gay men, namely GHB, mephedrone, and crystal meth. These were grouped together by an anonymous "academic" as constituting an "unholy trinity". Doing so evokes the polar opposite of the Christian religious imagery of the Holy Trinity, the sacred and indivisible nature of a benevolent, loving, and forgiving God. To imply a group of drugs are "unholy" suggests a dangerous and destructive nature to their use, as well as a moral deviation and even contagion. Doing so, moralises about rather than *with* chemsex sub-cultures, a key point addressed in the final chapter of this book. However, at this stage, it suffices to say that to make chemsex drugs appear metaphorically "unholy" also demands that such a claim is treated in the same way as the "holy" nature of God – i.e. it is something one must uncritically believe in the absence of empirical evidence. Yet, like the evangelically constructed certainties of God, when even a modicum of empiricism is applied it breaks down.

Firstly, as has long been established, the drugs people use are highly contingent on which are available in local drug markets (Demant et al., 2016). A full review of all the sociocultural histories of chemsex drugs is beyond the scope of this book. However, the transition from MDMA to mephedrone and back again is a particularly recent and clear example of how knowledge of and prevention of drug harms is contingent on stable supply. As MDMA purity and production fell dramatically after the 2004 outlawing of any trade in safrole oil (a key precursor in the production of MDMA), mephedrone (at the time a legal chemical) started to be mass imported and used as an alternative to MDMA in the UK and large parts of Europe (Clark, 2022; Measham et al., 2010). When new methods to synthesise MDMA were developed, and as mephedrone was made illegal in various jurisdictions, MDMA purity and production gradually increased again, as did its uptake in preference for mephedrone. Whilst the causes and effects of drug harms are complex, at least part of the changing drug market(s) in the UK led to some academics noting that gay men using these new drugs had a poor knowledge of them and their effects, and were experiencing harm secondary as a result of this (Bourne et al., 2015).

Speaking more generally therefore, the drugs which gay men choose to use are heavily influenced by wider political forces tied to prohibitionist logics, and these have broad and significant impacts. Data from The Global Drugs Survey, which collects data from 164 countries, suggest that gay men are significantly more likely to have used the three chemsex drugs (as well as ketamine and poppers) than their non-gay peers, they are also significantly *less* likely to have used THC, magic mushrooms, and LSD (Demant et al., 2016). In relation to combining drugs with sex, larger proportions of gay and bi men have had sex whilst on drugs than heterosexual men. The same is true for bisexual women versus straight women. Demant et al. (2016) have also argued that drugs are used by straight, gay, and bisexual men

to alleviate feelings of shame. Some drugs such as cocaine, MDMA, and mephedrone are rated broadly equally by men of all sexualities to reduce shame. Others such as ketamine are favoured by straight men, whilst GBL and methamphetamine by gay men. Enjoyment and enhancement of sex by taking GBL were rated as equally highly by straight and gay men and women. However, it is important to note that Demant et al.'s analysis is not disaggregated in relation to national contexts. Despite this, the drug-using patterns of the participants in this book broadly match these trends, but in some ways, they also exceed them, suggesting that nuanced in-depth consideration of localised contexts is an important consideration in chemsex research.

## Robert

Robert was the oldest participant at 58. He was a white man but had grown up in various places in sub-Saharan Africa, and because of the homophobic environment he moved to the UK. His age meant he had also lived through the AIDS pandemic. Before he left for the UK, he had lost 17 friends "*because they couldn't access treatment*" for AIDS. He himself was diagnosed with HIV when he arrived in the UK in 1999 and experienced since then what Race (2021) refers to as a "lifetime of drugs" where a complex relationship exists between the use of recreational and therapeutic drugs. Robert described himself as always having always been "*highly sexed. I love my sex. So, I have a wide range of tastes in sex*". He certainly used drugs to increase the pleasure of the sex he was having. However, he also used drugs because of the history of his body, specifically those tied to having lived with HIV for decades. For example, soon after his diagnosis he had a severe lung infection, one that he thought he was going to die from. As with many gay men of his age who are HIV positive, he also experienced what has been termed accelerated ageing (Nagington, 2015). He now described himself as "*on my last set of medication, I've got to wait for new ones to come out. I've got peripheral neuropathy, fatigue syndrome, the whole lot*". He described how he avoided using the lower cupboards in his kitchen because it was too painful to access them, and instead everything was on the worksurfaces. As a result of these long-term medical difficulties, he found his body experienced a myriad of aches and pains. It would be easy to read Robert's words as rooted in sorrow and sadness – but nothing could be further from the case – in our conversation at least. Humour was always nearby, whether it was his hilarious discussion of how he hallucinated someone developing a Mickey Mouse head when he was fisting them high on LSD, or describing how his orchids had died because of the nebulised drugs he had to take when he was seriously ill with pneumonia. His ability to laugh (about everything, often raucously) served as a potent lesson about how chemsex can connect with a much wider range of emotions.

When he was initially diagnosed, his HIV consultant appeared to recognise the importance of a harm-reduction and a sex-positive approach to drugs. He told him "*You can't drink alcohol anymore. But you can do hard drugs*". Whilst Robert did

not do many drugs for several years after his diagnosis, as his physical complications increased, he found adding in chemsex drugs helped ameliorate some of the difficulties that had been produced by a lifetime of pharmaceutical drugs. With regards to pain, he said that "*I know once I can feel the ketamine kicking in, I know that this pain's about to go*" and that once it does, he concluded, laughing "*I can fuck in all sorts of positions!*". Similarly, he used methamphetamine to overcome the fatigue he experienced. Robert was not naïve to what he called the "*pay back*" when after a long session he had to spend time recovering at home. He also acknowledged that "*If I didn't do drugs I might be a bit better [healthier] than what I am, but not that much better*". But what Robert demonstrates is the malleability of chemsex. He shows how he reflects upon the pros and cons of how it effects his body, as well as how chemsex need not always be narrated in terms of trauma, instead being a source of joy and humour. Therefore, narrowly viewing chemsex as involvement with a problematic triad of drugs prevents us developing a more nuanced understanding of what is involved. What is ultimately needed is to reverse the direction of the current narrative which aims to moralise about chemsex, rather than *with* it and the full range of sensations and emotions that it offers.

## Apps

The use of apps was seen by Stuart as a central organising feature of contemporary chemsex and all but one participant interviewed reported using apps to engage in chemsex, along with websites like *BBRT* (*Bareback Real Time)* and *NastyKinkPigs*. However, Stuart's narrative inflection of apps was something of a negative one, which contrasted with how interviews participants spoke about them. In his 2013 article, Stuart writes of "proliferating" apps that facilitate the location of other drug-using gay men via coded names such as: "HnH" meaning high and horny; as well as using emojis of rockets; and capitalising the letter T in words such as "poinT" in profile text to indicate a desire for injecting methamphetamine, aka Tina. This appears to suggest that the coding of sexual desires as a new concern, yet gay men have for a long time coded sexual practices, including those relating to drugs. For example, there is the long-established hanky code or the somewhat imprecise art of placing handkerchiefs in back pockets to signal the desire for specific sexual practices, or the use of a ziplock bag to indicate one is either looking for (right pocket) or has (left pocket) drugs to use during sex.

Stuart (2013: pg 7) also suggests that "any boundaries [gay men] may have had… become inconsequential [when] chaotic sexual marathons of up to 3 days with multiple partners become a drug induced priority". He also suggests apps "allow awareness and [the] availability of chemsex drugs to spread quickly beyond [particular] geographical regions" (Stuart & Weymann, 2015: pg 25). When physical and temporal boundaries are breached, fear is often the primary response to shore up the boundaries once again. Yet for some, blurring the distinction between the public space of online hookup apps and the private spaces of the home

are part of the pleasure of chemsex (Di Feliciantonio & Brown, 2023). In interview, Robert explained how and why this blurring occurred. He lived in a satellite town outside Manchester about 40 minutes away. Opportunities for chemsex were limited in his town, so he would drive into Manchester and "*park somewhere in the town centre, either by Basement sauna*", a gay sauna in Manchester close to hotels and areas where large numbers of gay men live. He would then "*turn Grindr on… [and] within half an hour I'd pull. And go and play, and that one finished, come back in the car, start again. Pull again*". Sometimes he would also go into the sauna; however, the sauna routinely employed security staff to search people for drugs. They did however allow people cheap passes to leave and return. He would therefore "*go to the car, do it [the drugs], and walk back to the sauna high with a hard-on*".

Apps for Robert provided a way to navigate a virtual-physical hybrid space in which pleasures and possibilities proliferated. At least in part Stuart's framing of apps-as-destructive could be explained by his own sense of guilt which he honestly expresses in one of his final pieces of writing *Predators, Sex and Politics* (Stuart, 2022). In his poem *To All My Grindr Lovers*, Stuart details how the rapidity of interactions on Grindr where stock questions are asked to assess desirability, coupled with the ability to simply cease communication can be deeply hurtful. In what is a level of honest reflection rarely achieved amongst men, Stuart recognises the traits in himself that he had recognised in the apps. Yet, Stuart's acknowledgement of any hurt he may have caused to others may itself be a projection of the hurt he feels when not being recognised and affirmed in the way he needed. All of this points towards a need for an alternative ontology of apps, one which doesn't instantly and only tie apps up in circuits of anger, anxiety, and disappointments.

Race (2015) argues that practices such as chemsex are not "determined by the technological environment from which they emerge" (pg 254), but neither are they neutral vessels. Instead they "act as mediators… that modify the practices and encounters they enable" (Race, 2015: pg 256). For Race, somewhat in contrast to Robert, the affordances of apps are valuable to some people, because of the distance they create. Furthermore, Race outlines that rather than being a source of anxiety, apps allow some people to maintain anonymised and distanced interactions that enhance their ability to safely negotiate their sexual practices, something particularly valued by HIV-positive individuals and gender non-conforming people, for whom there may remain a significant threat of violence in more proximal interactions. Apps can also facilitate the prolonged discussion of sexual fantasies (Race, 2015) which may (or may not) bleed into the real world (Garcia-Iglesias, 2022). The ability of users of apps to engage in lengthy fantasy co-construction is an affordance to gay men which may bring psychological benefit rather than harm (Race, 2015). Furthermore, the online ecology offered by apps can offer valuable ways to reach populations at times of heightened risk such as during the recent mpox outbreak (Garcia-Iglesias et al., 2023). Overall, one can conclude that apps, rather than being destructive have "generative properties… produce new proximities… [and] may generate amalgamations of fantasy and practice" (Race, 2015: pg 267).

## Practices of chemsex

As highlighted above, apps have come to affect how chemsex is organised across a wide range of spaces and places. Yet, how and where this occurs is culturally contingent. For example, Huang et al. (2023) note that in Taiwan local taboos and criminal restrictions on chemsex result in tactics whereby the police use apps in ways that entrap individuals. This transforms the way people express their desires on apps leading to highly coded phraseology being used. In addition, more broadly a local culture of having widely available cheap service labour can inform how people take drugs, with young men offering "injecting services" for clients. Such services and the need for discretion to avoid entrapment have therefore shaped the local culture and practices.

Differences also exist within countries. For example, Di Feliciantonio (2023) has notes important differences between Manchester and London. In Manchester, renting a city centre flat is reasonably affordable for the average worker, with buying a possibility for people on wages modestly above average. In London on the other hand, renting can be burdensome and buying is impossible for all but the wealthiest – this results in disparities of social capital and the ability to host chemsex parties. Manchester is yet again different. As Robert noted

> "*up here [in Manchester] it's a different attitude towards it. It's friendlier… I would rather play up in Manchester than down south… in London, you go [to a chemsex party], you have your drugs, you have your sex and you fuck off and they don't want to know you again, they don't want to see you again. Whereas up here it's a different story*".

As Di Feliciantonio (2023) notes some gay men specifically seek out cities where chemsex occurs, learn about it, and then bring it home to their locale. However, the different affordances of chemsex produced in cities versus smaller towns also offered some participants ways to produce a distance between themselves and chemsex. This can be seen in Mark's case where distance became a useful mechanism to help him manage his use of chems. Mark was 34 when we first met, and he mostly worked as a chef. At the time of our first interview, he was living in Manchester and had been sober from methamphetamine for 6 months but continued to smoke weed (marijuana) to help with anxiety. He described his drug use as "*controlled to a degree*". Reflecting on his previous patterns of use, he said that he had enjoyed doing chemsex and had "*met interesting people*" through it. At our second interview, he had started a new job and had moved to doing chemsex "*maybe once a month, if that*" saying that when he had "*two full days off, when I can afford to go and get something, and then have a recovery day off… it's a healthier way of doing it*". After our second interview, we lost contact for nearly a year, and when we next met up, it turned out he had lost his job through no fault of his own. This led to him "*starting to lose my head a little bit and started to pick up quite heavily on drugs and other things, and bits and pieces, and it all kind of crashed down*

*in a big bang*". To maintain control over his chemsex Mark avoided Manchester and instead stayed living in a small town about an hour away. He found that in Manchester "*it always ends up a bit of a mess… there's stuff going on [where I live now], but nothing like it does in Manchester. It's a lot easier, makes life nice*". By separating himself from certain 'places of chemsex', Mark was able to regain control. The practices of chemsex are therefore inextricably linked to places of chemsex, which include being online.

## Online

Whilst none of the participants in this study reported participating in chemsex online, it is important to note that this does occur, blurring the boundaries of private and public space ever further. Møller (2020) notes how videoconferencing software can enable large groups (sometimes hundreds) of mostly men to connect for sexual encounters enhanced by drug use. The digital environment also facilitates more expansive affective relations compared to in-person chemsex sessions, with added intensity related to the visual display of drug use and sexual acts, and with the identities of performer and viewer being interchangeable. In most cases, attendees participate from within private rooms at home, transmitting their image (and sometimes the sound) to others. Yet, there remain rules about what should and should not be transmitted. For example, drug use is often maximally visible with participants being encouraged to show their injecting practices. Others may blow smoke from inhaling crystal methamphetamine directly into the lens of the camera. Lights, music, and sometimes pornography are all played alongside to heighten the affects. Participants must also ensure that they are always visible on camera (or account for brief periods when they are not). The online world also operates asynchronously via pornsites to create a broader public of chemsex where algorithms and user-generated playlists allow people to seamlessly consume chemsex (Møller, 2021). Both online synchronous rooms and pornsites operate (largely) outside of any obvious jurisdictions, despite governments attempting to regulate access to pornography and sexualised ways of relating to other people online. Chemsex therefore moves between spaces on the macro international level, the meso intercity level, and the micro level between houses and other hybrid spaces and places such as saunas and cars.

## Defining chemsex

All the above points towards the existence of ideological battles over the definition of chemsex. Stuart claims that "chemsex" has begun to be used to denote "sex and drugs in sexual contexts by any population" other than gay men which he suggests is a "distorted view" promoted by "the media" (Stuart, 2016: pg 295). He extends this argument in his 2019 article to claim that such an extension beyond gay men who have experienced "cultural trauma" amounts to a form of "cultural appropriation"

(Stuart, 2019: pg 9). He also claims to be the first person who "coined the term". Whether or not this is the case is highly contestable. The historic record suggests that it was coined by gay men in Sydney, Australia, with Slavin (2004) documenting it being in common usage in the early 2000s to describe the consumption of crystal meth, both on the dance floor and as part of gay men's sexual practice; long before Stuart's entry into the discourse on gay men, sex, and drugs.

The veracity of Stuart's claims is not the central focus of this analysis (he is after all, no longer alive to defend them). However, what it is important to demonstrate is that since the early 2000s the term 'chemsex' has been appropriated by epidemiology, public health, and biomedicine. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this form of appropriation if in doing so it allows the needs of gay men using drugs to be articulated in productive ways that produce care. However, to extract the term chemsex from its indigenous roots and re-narrate it in terms of epidemics, drug taking and risks, and then to refuse to acknowledge (and argue against exploring) its sociocultural history is itself cultural appropriation. As has been noted elsewhere such a tendency leads to chemsex becoming ideologically fixed by failing to engage with its historical origins and its sociocultural depths (Bryant et al., 2018; Drysdale et al., 2020, 2021). To make sense of the phenomenon, chemsex must be recognised for its "novel assembling of drugs, bodies, media, places, language, and theory at a particular historical moment…" with a particular focus on how it produces "sociability and experience" (Møller & Hakim, 2021: pg 2). This kind of definition captures the situatedness, historicity, and malleability of chemsex, which depends on available (sub)-cultural connections to signify and be signified. Ultimately, chemsex has serious social meaning to those involved. It is something that can be (and is) transformed, but it is also something that transforms that which it connects to. Chemsex thereby provides us with a valuable opportunity to explore the moral lessons of expanding "the norms by which humans are permitted to conduct liveable lives" (Salih & Butler, 2004: pg 4).

Taking this as its starting point, Chapter 2 of this book, *The Disciplinary Spectrum of Chemsex*, explores how chemsex has become increasingly visible in recent times and has been subjected to various disciplinary mechanisms. Science, labour, medicine, shame, criminal justice, and website algorithms are all explored for how they have shaped the discursive regimes chemsex is represented within. The shaping of these representations is examined in relation to the iterative relationships between individual experience and broader cultural representations. The visibility that this produces is considered for how it comes to trap chemsex in moralising and pathologising narratives. The chapter concludes by suggesting that counter-discourses can challenge dominant representations, allowing novel understandings to be crafted and built.

Chapter 3, *The Trauma and Tragedy Disciplinary Apparatus*, explores how gay men themselves have experienced and represent chemsex. It begins by outlining how trauma and tragedy, both of which had roots in the AIDS crisis, became the dominant frameworks for understanding and constructing chemsex. The chapter then explores how trauma-tragedy plays out in the narratives of individuals such

as Barry, whose experiences of abuse and addiction were retroactively made sense of using a trauma framework which I introduced to the interview. Potential ways to resist these trauma-tragedy loops are then explored via the work of Guillaume Dustan and Paul Preciado, both of whom stress the importance of embodied, affective modes of resistance and engagement that prizes porosity of the self to others.

Chapter 4, *The Musicality of Chemsex*, furthers the exploration of resistance as porosity and collectivity. Drawing on Foucault's concepts of *sciencia sexualis* and *ars erotica*, and queer musicology, the ways in which chemsex produces resonances between bodies is explored. Three participants' constructions of chemsex are used to read the musical qualities of three films: Carl with Sonbert's *Amphetamine*; Ryan with Gogarty and Fairman's *Chemsex;* and Julian with Cole's *Slammed.* The analysis here focuses on how music, sound, and the embodied experiences of chemsex create resonances between bodies that challenge dominant discourses around sexuality and drug use. Focusing specifically on how chemsex should be understood not as a pathological struggle, but as a space in which the boundaries between individuals become more porous and malleable. The chapter concludes that thinking about chemsex as music has a pivotal role in finding these resonances, allowing for the formation of collective experiences and subjectivities amongst gay men, and in doing so provides a framework for critiquing contemporary subjectivity.

Chapter 5, *Fear to Pleasure*, examines the complex and often contradictory ways that boundaries are constructed, maintained, and negotiated in relation to the practice of chemsex. It focuses specifically on how the boundaries around chemsex are often rooted in fear and moralism, which can paradoxically heighten desire for the very behaviours they seek to prohibit. Boundaries are noted to operate in multiple ways in the experiences of several participants. For example, Andrew found the "*sheer clandestine nature*" of chemsex enticing, whilst Jack found these boundaries interesting none-the-less found the fear associated with crossing them too intense. Bruno on the other hand operated a very different relationship to clandestine and fear-inflected boundaries. He maintained control over his engagement with chemsex by keeping certain objects (like a drug pipe) close, rather than trying to completely eliminate reminders. Drawing on all three of these examples a more nuanced, queer-theoretical approach to boundaries is developed. Rather than viewing boundaries as fixed and impermeable, boundaries are argued to be culturally contingent and performatively constructed which can lead to new forms of pleasure, connection, and understanding.

Chapter 6, *Capitalism and Destruction*, opens with exploring how chemsex is constructed as a "destructive force" in relation to gay communities' culture. It examines how chemsex serves to distinguish between "good gays" and "bad gays". The chapter examines the psychological and social mechanisms underlying this construction, such as projection and pre-emptive attacks, in which anxieties surrounding the transgression of boundaries are displaced onto chemsex. It also critiques how this moralising discourse serves to protect established norms of gender and sexuality, and how it is leveraged to maintain the homonormative ideal of the "respectable" gay man. Finally, the chapter posits that chemsex,

particularly within the Manchester scene, acts as a deconstructive force challenging capitalist logics in gay culture. Alternative modes of communality and temporality that exist within the chemsex sub-culture are explored for their broader liberatory potential.

The final chapter, *The Moral Lessons of Chemsex*, examines how representations of chemsex as isolating and disconnecting fail to capture its potential to foster new forms of connection and collectivity. The chapter highlights how chemsex reveals the porosity of the boundaries, both physical and social, that structure modern liberal subjectivity. Rather than viewing chemsex through the lens of addiction, dependency, and disconnection, the chapter argues that we should recognise how it can foster new forms of collectivity and mutual care, that exceed those provided by language-based frameworks. This form of connection or "visceral solidarity" takes the form of indelible, alinguistic connections between bodies that challenge individualistic notions of subjectivity. Embracing the visceral solidarity produced through the shared, penetrative experiences so widely produced by chemsex offers a way to resist the individualism and isolation imposed by modern neoliberal discourses. Visceral solidarity is theorised as creating circuits of transmission and togetherness that subvert efforts to neatly define and control the boundaries of the self. In this way, chemsex points towards the possibility of more porous, open, and capacious ways of living and relating.

## Note

1 PrEP is now available for free via sexual health clinics in England, at the time of this interview it was not. Access was capped to via an ethically problematic clinical, see Nagington and Sandset (2020) for a more detailed analysis.

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Chapter 2

# The disciplinary spectrum

## Pleasure and productivity

Foucault (1990, 2012) argued that in modern times, power operates via disciplinary structures that are constituted via various intertwined aspects, shaping how power relations affect the body and sexuality. Disciplinary practices involve constant surveillance and the establishment of norms. Bodies are observed, categorised, and judged based on their adherence to societal standards. This process of normalisation encourages individuals to self-regulate their behaviour, aligning with the desired norms, and thereby perpetuating the power structures in place. He also argues that the disciplining of bodies operates via various institutions like schools and medical establishments which produce docile bodies that conform to societal expectations. Foucault also introduces the concept of biopolitics, where the state exerts control over populations through the regulation of bodies. This involves managing birth rates, health standards, and life expectancy. The disciplining of docile bodies serves as a means to optimise and control populations, enhancing the state's power over life, often with the aim of directing bodies and sexuality towards the pursuit of an efficient labour force. For Foucault, therefore, sex ceased being something that was felt between bodies as a pleasure, and instead became something to be studied and defined and embedded through the power structures in society. The knowledge produced from this study of sex begins to exert a power over what sex is and what it means to have sex. Foucault refers to this as the disciplinary apparatus that shapes and controls both discourse on sex and the meanings that become ascribed to it. In Foucault's work, these meanings and the power they exert primarily pertain to medical, educational, psychiatric, and judicial mechanisms. However, Foucault cautions against thinking of these as top-down institutions that exert a power on sex; instead, he argues that power operates in a more productive manner which does not only operate to repress sex, but also produces an array of discourses so that sex becomes knowable – in other words, power is productive, not repressive. The disciplinary apparatuses of modern society, such as medicine, situate the positions from which participants in this study engaged with, and produced knowledge about the practices we now call chemsex.

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## The cultural representations of gay men and the start of chemsex

It is relatively uncontroversial to say that bodies identified as male have been having sex together for as long as that identification has existed and that drugs (both botanical and synthetic) have formed a part of many cultures' sexual practices for a very long time, although in many cases their uses are only just beginning to be documented in careful and considered ways (Pakasi, 2020). For chemsex amongst gay men to flourish as a sub-culture, it relied on gay men being able to identify one another as gay (or bisexual) without fear of being arrested for expressing same-sex desire; it also relies on synthetic drugs to be relatively freely available. As such, an emerging gay culture alongside access to drugs only really began to emerge in the West from the 1960s onwards. This occurred in what can be characterised as broad (and at times tardy) changes in Western countries. For example, Portugal and Ireland did not decriminalise homosexuality until 1982 and 1993, respectively. However, once decriminalisation occurred the representation and possibilities for gay men rapidly changed, at least in part because of how neighbouring countries influenced discourse in a post-decriminalisation context. This is not to say that gay men did not exist or make attempts to represent themselves before the 1960s, but as Dyer (2003) notes they did so through more heavily coded fashions than the relatively free forms of association observable in later sub-cultures that involved men having sex with one another on drugs. Likewise, it would be odd to say drug use was novel in the 1960s, it was not. However, what was new was the level of availability of amphetamine class pharmaceuticals which emerged out of mass production techniques developed in Germany during World War II, all of which lead to new possibilities for pharma-driven experiences (Preciado, 2013).

In the West, the 1960s therefore can be identified as the start of a converging and growing set of circumstances that shaped both sexuality and the availability of drugs. Prior to this in Europe, a form of compulsory heterosexuality had been enforced via religious and more latterly psychiatric means. This has been argued to be at least in part secondary to the need for a secure labour force in the service of capitalism, via the conjugal family whom could be monitored and controlled by valorising the traditional family and vilifying homosexuality (Greenberg & Bystryn, 1984). However, capitalism has also been argued in its later stages (from approximately the 20th century onwards) to produce more (not less) opportunities for men to explore, experience, and represent themselves as homosexual. As d'Emilio (1983) notes in the US, a rapidly urbanising population during the 20th century in which male–female roles were no longer as oppressively organised around single households allowed a proliferation of gay sub-cultures (d'Emilio, 1983).

Whilst gay sex and drugs continued to signify little more than perversion or deviance to the mainstream population, throughout the latter parts of the 20th century in the West, there was evidence of gay (and bisexual) men representing themselves to one another via new styles in literature, art, and film. For example, as discussed in Chapter 5, Warren Sonbert produced a film called *Amphetamine*

about gay men using drugs, described at the time by film critic James Stoller as "beautiful and pure" (Gartenberg, 2023). Equally, Robert Mapplethorpe produced photographs throughout the 1960s and 1970s of men that conveyed a new and erotic homosexually inflected male gaze challenging the intersection of art and pornography. Similarly, in the UK, artists such as Derek Jarman were pushing the boundaries of representing male homosexuality with the homoerotic representation of Saint Sebastian in the 1976 film *Sebastian.* These and many representations of homosexuality required viewers to reconsider their perceptions of beauty and decency. This revolution in the representation of sexuality was of course not limited to homosexuality, some gay men such as Andy Warhol were equally producing work about the wider sexual revolution in film such as the 1966 film *Chelsea Girls* that captured similar themes around eroticism and drug use. Earlier examples of gay men representing marginalised desires in film and the arts do exist such as Jean Genet's film *Un Chant d'Amour* from 1950, but it was quickly censored in France and other jurisdictions such as the US. Despite this, it did have enduring influences on people such as Sonbert, Warhol, and Jarman. Yet, for gay men at least, the revolution in sexual representation came to an abrupt end with the AIDS crisis which led to the deaths of many artists (including Sonbert, Jarman, and Mapplethorpe) and their audiences. A broad shift can then be traced regarding how and why representation mattered to gay men: it had become an urgent matter of speaking life in the face of the silence of death.[1] Towards the beginning of the end of the AIDS crisis, Brad Gooch's (1996) novel *The Golden Age of Promiscuity* was published. In the face of the unrelenting deaths caused by AIDS, Gooch breathes new life into the multi-valent pleasures that had flourished in the interregnum between a post-1960s Stonewall and an exuberant pre-AIDS era of gay male sexuality, thus (re)producing a pedagogy for an as-yet-to-be-constructed chemsex.

*The Golden Age of Promiscuity* is set in New York, mostly around Times Square, Chelsea, and the Meat Packing district. The lead protagonist is Sean a young gay man who has recently graduated from college in 1972 and is hoping to become an English major, only instead to become side-lined into making films of the subculture in which he was located. We follow Sean in a series of drug and sex-infused wanderings through New York up until 1979, the year before the first documented deaths from AIDS in the USA. The first use of drugs in the novel occurs when Sean is dancing in a gay club for the first time. An amyl-soaked handkerchief is being handed around and individual actions give way to the communal experience of the drug-infused bodies on the dance floor, everyone topless, moving to the rhythms of the music Sean is momentarily taken out of himself. To enter into relationships with others is to fundamentally be subjected to the language practices which enable these relationships to be intelligible, it is to be subjected to a way of understanding which precede the self (Butler, 2005). To be released from these language practices is to be released from the self, even momentarily. Such a release reveals the potential for drugs to produce novel ways of experiencing the self and others. Somewhat inevitably later on in the novel Sean develops an STI – a shame-infused echo of the

extensive connections Sean has made. He goes to visit Dr Bennet for treatment and is given antibiotics for both treatment and prophylaxis. A few days later, Sean visits a gay sauna to see the same doctor engrossed in the communal pleasures of male bodies "hooked up to one another via vials, bottles, soaked handkerchiefs. Tubes might as well have been looped out of their nostrils into their anuses through each other's mouths" (Gooch, 1996: pg 110). A fantasy begins to emerge in which the boundaries of the body, one of the most rigidly disciplined boundaries, break down and pharmaceutical drugs are repurposed from their role in treating pathogens to one in which they facilitate the intermingling of bodies and pleasures. The power of medicine to legitimise drugs and drug use is co-opted to facilitate a loosening of the boundaries around the body.

Yet, whilst holding drugs in this power/pleasure apparatus, Gooch pushes against the notion of drugs as having knowable and powerful actions that exert an effect on individuals or society. Instead, their relationship is complicated by Sean not always being a reliable narrator as to whether he is or is not on drugs at the time of particular events. In one instance, Sean is having his nipple pierced by a stranger during which he describes a transcendent-like experience akin to having an anaesthetic. His friend Annie then gives him a ring which she claims she made whilst he was "under", under what is unclear. In loquacious prose, he recalls childhood memories of thwarted desires that arose whilst he was having his nipple pierced. This matches the loquacious prose that Sean adopts when writing about a sexual encounter with a man named "Satan" who gave him Dextrin (an amphetamine) before they had sex. The style of prose also matches that used in another place when Sean describes the beauty of his friend Annie, after which Sean jovially undoes the veracity of his claims about her beauty by questioning whether it was just a function of the cannabis they had both been smoking. Finally inspired by WA Auden, Sean takes a large dose of psychedelics only to have "an entirely ordinary day". One begins to question whether the ordinary days Sean recalls may have also been influenced by psychedelics. Throughout the novel, therefore Gooch rejects any easy ability for the reader to resolve drugs into any particular effects, or if drugs are even needed for particular effects to occur.

*The Golden Age of Promiscuity* published in the same year that HIV combination therapy became available can therefore be read as a call to reclaim and reteach the polymorphous pleasures that gay men had once enjoyed in relation to sex and drugs, but which had been entirely written over by the cautious tones of medicine. Such medical discourses have often been used as a means to strengthen the boundaries placed around bodies (particularly but not only) those infected with HIV (Nagington, 2023). In doing so, medicine serves as a potent but ultimately immoral way to close off access to the fundamental need that Butler (2015) speaks of for humans to be in relationships with one another. For almost all of history, there has simply not been a word to describe the activity of chemsex, for which we now have a language and convenient discursive apparatus to describe (and control) it. Yet, as outlined by Gooch, sex on drugs was merely a quotidian fact of life for many men who had sex with men from the 1960s. Causes and effects were not

ruminated upon, particularly sought after, or subjected to a discursive apparatus that demanded it be interrogated, controlled, and preferably eliminated.

As noted earlier, a name for sex on drugs "chemsex" was first documented by Slavin (Slavin, 2004a, 2004b) in his ethnography of gay men's sexual practices in Sydney at the close of the 20th century. Similar to Gooch's novel, the communality offered by drugs and sex between men were central themes in Slavin's work in which drugs are freely talked about and used by gay men, even on the dance floor, with little to no stigma attached to the practice. This occurred in underground bars and private homes, and sexual partners were fluid and variable as were the types of sex which ranged from one-on-one short hookups to group sex lasting 12+ hours. However, in contrast to Gooch's world which was largely ignored by wider society, the AIDS crisis had politicised a generation of gay men and their allies into claiming a radical visibility. This served as a potently central theme for political action to highlight governmental silence, inaction, and ambivalence towards the lives of people dying from AIDS. Yet, once the AIDS crisis abated in the Western countries, this visibility remained and began to trap them in a disciplinary apparatus that made chemsex both nameable and knowable via very specific discursive regimes – ones that had been mobilised over the preceding two decades. John serves as a particularly prescient example of this sudden invocation of visibility.

## John

John was 37 when we first met. He is a Black man who worked for a local charity doing a middle-management role. He had had a long relationship with illegal drugs having grown up in Nottingham where his father was a local marijuana dealer. This resulted in him rebelling against drugs as an adolescent. However, when he moved to Manchester to study at university he was introduced to the gay clubbing scene where he would take ecstasy and ketamine with friends on the weekend, this occasional bled into him having sex on drugs. He did not intentionally combine drugs with sex outside of a clubbing setting until about ten years later, and he would continue to "dabble" until he was diagnosed with HIV. When John received his HIV diagnosis, he broke up with his partner of five years, with whom he had had a somewhat tempestuous relationship. He recalls the conversation with his partner when he disclosed his status, he says his partner said, "*Oh you're just going to be one of those slammers now aren't you?*", which he then reflects left him "*thinking, "What is that? What is this thing that he's telling me I'm going to be?*". At that moment, a clear line had been drawn around John's conceptualisation of chemsexers: "*one of those*" connoted a certain group of outsiders. Any sense of communality was rapidly eroded and rather than drugs producing free flowing possibilities of communal pleasure, John quickly became unwillingly subjected to a disciplinary apparatus suffused with shame. In turn, this transformed chemsex from a communal activity to a personally isolating one.

After his diagnosis this powerful apparatus began to shape John's experiences further. He received little to no help from any professional or charitable services

and by his own admission "*pressed the fuck it button*", engaging in frequent chemsex to cope with his diagnosis and subsequent relationship breakup. After a year, some friends stepped in and offered him support that helped him to moderate his use, which he did. At the end of the first interview, John was clear that he had had *"more bad that good*" experiences of chemsex. The bad ones were characterised by being "*dire and dirgy [boring]… not a hard-on in the room*". Yet, there remained several experiences in which he had "*the right company, on the right drugs*" which resulted in "*an amazingly shift perspective kind of night*". The possibilities for pleasure had not been entirely disciplined away. Instead, John said that he remained open to chemsex and enjoyed "*the occasional dabble and losing my marbles a little bit*" saying that he thought it was "*healthy more than anything else*".

This call for occasional and healthy forms of pleasure is subtly different from Gooch's communal loss of self. Instead, the experience of chemsex has become disciplined in relation to "being healthy". This is one of the ways that drug use has begun to be policed in subtle ways in liberal democracies, where the logic becomes that it is healthy to enjoy oneself, but one must also enjoy oneself in a healthy way (Karlsen & Villadsen, 2016). When the boundaries between health and pleasure begin to merge, the subject intensively monitors themselves to maintain the correct balance. Almost to the point of the two being indistinguishable from one another – it becomes pleasurable to be healthy.

Self-monitoring was evident throughout John's interview. John was widely read in the social sciences. On his bookshelves he had copies of books such as Stanley Cohen's *Folk Devil's and Moral Panics* and he was familiar with many of the key theorists that have come to inform the book you now read. He was able to interview me as much as I was him. Hence at the start of our second interview John began asked me: "*What themes are you establishing?*" and "*What bracket would you perceive my use in?*". I responded saying that people's use and practices had been incredibly diverse "*everything from someone trying it once and not really liking it to someone walking down a motorway psychotic*". Whilst John was not unique in making enquiries about how other people engaged with chemsex (it was in fact a common occurrence as interviews progressed), his motivations revealed the desire to know more about chemsex, stating: "*that's what I was doing in my head, I was trying to place myself on that spectrum that you're doing right there*".

Suddenly, the longitudinal interviews and my desire to engage in a collaborative form of analysis, had taken on a disciplinary quality, one that to a certain extent harked back to the initial comment from his ex-partner that he had to avoid becoming "*one of those slammers*". John felt the need to draw a distinction between those that manage their use responsibly (like himself), and those who lose control and need redemption. This self-management was not an easy task. Instead, as John went on to say, his position on the spectrum was a "*difficult place, between knowing I enjoy getting high… and managing to keep on top of it so that it doesn't manage me*". The implication here being he had to manage it responsibly, indeterminacy as in *The Golden Age of Promiscuity* was not a viable option.

## The disciplinary apparatuses of chemsex

Several other disciplinary apparatuses were evident in the interviews, namely: science, labour, medicine, shame, and criminal justice. Whilst few participants reported experiencing all of them, the way they shaped the representation of chemsex in the interviews is important to explore for the forthcoming chapters.

### *Science*

For three participants, scientific discourses on drugs served as a potent means by which individuals came to self-discipline their drug use. Michael was 37 when we first met. He was an engineer by training and had worked in the pharmaceutical industry for ten years. As such, he had an in-depth knowledge of how to measure the quantities of drugs. He also engaged in a close and reflective documentation of their effects. He explained that before he went out clubbing on an evening, he would use chemical reagent kits to test his drugs for what they were meant to be. He would then measure his MDMA into "*small bombs of 60mgs each*" and note down on his phone the times that he took them, and their effects. He had "*learned about the approximate dose ranges and testing kits from websites like The Loop*" (a drug harm reduction charity) as well as various academic talks that he had attended in his free time. This gave Michael a way to experience the chemsex spectrum with a sense of security and mastery. He recalled once taking approximately 240 mg of MDMA over about three hours stating:

> "*I remember in a club feeling, no, this is too much. This is too intense and like I kind of, but I knew how much I'd taken that night. I've got it all in a diary… I think about two-thirds of that would be the sweet spot, so that's pretty much what I take now*".

For Michael, his chemsex was almost always contiguous with clubbing, expecting to meet someone and then returning to their place to have sex. He had a preference for doing this with someone who was also high which he found to be "*one of the greatest pleasures I can experience*". Michael, in a similar way to John thereby disciplined his use in reference to health and pleasure, using scientific methods to enhance his pleasure through the careful use of healthy (or at least not harmful) amounts of drugs. However, science also operated as a way for others to severely control their usage.

Similar to Michael, Aahan had a background in the biomedical sciences. He was 32 years old and was Siletthi Bangladeshi. Whilst he noted there was an "*absolute silence*" about male homosexuality in Bangladesh, he described his parents as "*open minded and educated*"; they had "*never pressurised*" him to question or change his sexuality. Aahan had lived in the UK for the past five years and had recently finished a PhD. During these past five years he had been able to explore his sexuality more than he had ever done before. He also noted

that the drug culture in the UK was vastly different to Bangladesh, in the UK "*people know where to get things [drugs]*" and sometimes there was "*peer pressure*" to take them. He also noted that knowledge about drugs was more freely available in the UK. Aahan had therefore moved from a culture where he perceived talk of (gay) sex and drugs to be silenced, to one in which the possibilities for experimentation were much more significant. Aahan described a particularly ascetic approach to drugs that was shaped by his understanding of the biomedical sciences. He claimed to "*know what it is*" and "*which kind of effects [drugs] can have*" which had created an "*intellectual barrier*" preventing him from taking drugs extensively. Although Aahan was repeatedly asked for his scientific understanding of the effects drugs have on neurotransmitter levels in chemsex, he did not provide it, but this was not due to an inability to use biomedical discourses. Infact, later in the interview he was able to describe in detailed biomedical terms how post-exposure prophylaxis for HIV worked in relation to specific enzymes and DNA replication. Instead, what appeared to be happening was that the biomedical morphed into the social – causing drugs and drug use to have the power to "*override the normality of what to do, and what not to do*" without any specific discussion of cell receptors, enzymes or biology.

Unlike Michael or other participants such as Carl (discussed in Chapter 4) and Robert (described in Chapter 1) who found the release from normality liberating, Aahan found this release troubling. This was particularly the case when he felt the boundaries of his body might have been breached by HIV when once he had sex on alcohol and cocaine. We gain a sense of bodily integrity through our subjection to existing frameworks of power and knowledge (Butler, 1997). Consequently, attempting to separate the self from these foundational structures, without any alternative framework to reshape the self, risks being perceived as an unbearable loss. Having had the boundaries of his body threatened, Aahan regained his sense of bodily integrity by saying "*I've learned my lesson…*" suggesting that he would no longer take drugs and had internalised the narrative of prohibition. Yet as with all disciplinary actions there was a flow between the self-regulation of the individual and the power of this regulation be reached out towards others. As Aahan narrated his story, the subject shifted from the self to the other. When describing a visit to a gay sauna he suggested that for the people he observed, "*it was probably hard for them to decide against or decide for safe sex, like using condoms or not using condoms or that kind of thing*". The power of drugs, and his uncomfortable reading of how they had become implicated in the boundaries of his body being breached, then became projected onto his motivations for undertaking the interview:

> "*One of my reasons why I wanted to take part is because I think people need to be a lot more aware of things, like is it good or is it bad, all these things. It's one thing when you're in your teen years, you try everything and then you get to your late twenties and thirties and you can just become like a normal working citizen*".

For Aahan, there was no liberation from power, no loss of its control, only finely balanced shifts which trace paths through the power structures within which lives are constantly (re)constructed, with an appeal to become a normal working citizen being merely another one of the disciplinary apparatuses which mutually reinforce one another to shape chemsexing gay men's bodies and pleasures.

### *Labour*

James was one the youngest participants, he was 21 years old, white, working class, and had been doing chemsex since before he came to university. He came from a small northern town which meant in order to do chemsex he had to travel long distances by train. He worked at weekends and was clear that he "*wouldn't miss work*" so instead he would "*do it in the week when I was off*". When he moved to Manchester, the opportunities for him to engage in chemsex grew. James was clear that he enjoyed chemsex and found that he was "*more adventurous*" because it "*reduced inhibitions*". After a few months in Manchester, he had made some regular contacts. However, he continued to moderate his use around any study commitments saying:

> "*uni last year was really condensed, I did Monday afternoon, which was a lecture, that was only an hour long, and then I had full Tuesday, full Wednesday morning, full Thursday. So, I'd go out on Thursday night, and go through until Monday afternoon*".

James managed his whole first year at university like this, until he noticed he had started using drugs for stress relief rather than pleasure. At this point he "*went off the rails*" and found himself unable to study any longer so he took an interruption from university. It was at this point I met him for the first interview just before Christmas time. He had started working regular hours in a local bar but still had contacts who invited him to do chemsex, however he noted that he was "*busy with work until after Christmas*" so turned people down. However, he realised that come:

> "*say January, I'll have maybe a week where I'm not at work, something like that, I'll probably spend three of those days in someone's room, or like at a party, off my tits, doing whatever with people. 'Cause it's kind of like that thing, like when I haven't suppressed it with something like work, or uni or whatever, it's like there*".

A more critical review of how the ideology of selling ones labour influences chemsex is undertaken in chapter 6. However, suffice to say here the need to do paid work had a moderating effect on James' drug use.

Similar to James, Andrew (who is discussed more comprehensively in Chapter 5) highlighted the disciplinary effects of work on his drug use. When we first met,

Andrew was 31, he was relatively affluent and came from a white middle class family. He had been educated at a prestigious university and had copies of philosophy books opposite his sofa stacked up on the floor and on bookshelves. He was widely read in the classics and would sometimes refer to these books and authors as we spoke about his experiences. In the first interview he noted how a couple of years earlier when he was living in Sheffield he lost a job because he had been doing so many drugs he wasn't "*in a fit state the day after*". Despite this experience he described how he found the use of drugs pleasurable and mind expanding, helping him to understand his mind and body in a way that academic study had not. He also noted how the taboo nature of drug use heightened its pleasures.

The appeal of being a normal working citizen emerged clearly in Andrew's later interviews and his drive to maintain efficiency at work significantly influenced his changing attitudes towards drug use. After a 36-hour chemsex session that left him with residual hallucinations and necessitated two days off work, he recognised the detrimental impact on his professional life. Upon his return to Manchester, his determination to be an efficient worker led him to discard all his drugs, stating he "*looked at all the drugs and thought how they've affected me… and bunged them all together and down the garbage chute*". By the third interview, Andrew had moderated his drug use, with extended periods of abstinence and a commitment to cease all drug use during Lent. He categorised drugs into three types: those legally prescribed by his doctor, those legally available but potentially dangerous like tobacco, and those unacceptable due to their impact on his work, such as drugs that make you "*trip out for ten hours and you miss a week of work*". Andrew's evolving narrative underscores how his identity and sense of normalcy are closely tied to his ability to function as a productive worker, illustrating how societal norms and the desire for normalcy can shape personal decisions about drug use. Medicine also comes to reinforce attitudes towards being an efficient and effective worker.

### *The medical gaze*

Gay men are no strangers to having their sex lives investigated by biomedical discourses. At times, this sort of research has produced productive questions and demands for enhanced treatment that disproportionately affect the gay male community. Examples include research that examines the responses to mpox and how to improve public health responses and collaboration with the gay male community (Garcia-Iglesias et al., 2022; Garcia-Iglesias et al., 2023a, 2023b). Such research highlights the historic good practices in collaborating with, rather then attempting to control communities, so that illness and suffering are minimised. Furthermore, even where an extensive apparatus of monitoring exists it need not always result in coercive forms of social control, it can instead be used to help professionals adapt and change the places and practices of care (Nagington et al., 2021). However, these caveats withstanding, Foucault's (1973) primary argument that medicine functions as a cohesive way to exert power over the body remains an important critique.

He argues this occurs through using a specialist language which controls and isolates its subjects (patients), naming this 'the medical gaze'.

Andrew provides one of the clearest examples of how this medical gaze can quickly become felt as imperatives which must be obeyed, rather than examples of meaningful community engagement which shapes and nuances the language medical practitioners use. Having already disciplined himself so as to become a productive worker, Andrew noted how after his last chemsex session he had been diagnosed with syphilis. The syphilis caused him significant rectal pain along with other symptoms like a rash. After presenting to a doctor and getting treatment he said that the infection had eventually "*cleared away*". Yet there remained a moral shadow which Andrew felt had been cast over large sections of his life: it was a "*horror*" when he had to turn up for work when in pain; and this had occurred because of the "*extreme*" sex that he had been having, that went beyond the normative boundaries of regular sex. This led him to conclude that "*all the innocence of sex and all the innocence of drugs went away*". Unlike Sean in *The Golden Age of Promiscuity* where medicine serves both as treatment of the diseased body and liberation from shame, for Andrew medicine did not liberate him. Instead the diagnosis of syphilis (despite the treatment) left him to feel like he had no longer managed his body in a way that secured its boundaries against disease. The experience registered not just as a medical failure, but also a moral one. His pleasures no longer led to anything productive, instead the medical gaze shaped Andrew's sex so as to make it "*dangerous and destructive, and not in an exciting way…*". Similar to Aahan, these feelings became projected out onto others as a "*stupid and painful thing that people do*". Chemsex had become something other people do, and in the aftermath of biomedical intervention Andrew now sought to establish a boundary saying "*I don't want to do it anymore*".

Within the context of chemsex, medicine could also operate as a way for people to discipline their body along more neoliberal lines. I talk in more detail about Barry in the next chapter, however suffice it to say that his single interview stands out as one of most emotionally complex and at times distressing events in the whole study. Barry, at least in part, used chemsex as a means to cope with deeply embedded trauma experienced in his childhood. He had received little in the way of psychological support at the time, despite having been detained under the Mental Health Act after becoming psychotic secondary to his use of methamphetamine. His experience of being detained in this way, and the associated mental distress he experienced, were not the motivating factors that restrained his drug use. Instead, after being released from a psychiatric ward Barry was diagnosed with Hepatitis C. Similar to Andrew and Aahna, it was the real or potential breakdown in his bodily defences that led him to control his chemsex. Despite healthcare services being free at the point of use in the UK, with the actual costs rarely conveyed to the patient, Barry described how he was told by his hepatologist that the Hepatitis C treatment would cost the NHS "*£15,000*" and that:

> "*to know that somebody's willing to give me that, to know that I'd be wasting good government money which could be used somewhere else if I was to just*

*walk away and make the same mistakes again, that breaks my heart. I already feel like I'm using too much of the government's resources. I'm not one that likes to feel like I'm being looked after by people*".

As Rhodes et al. (2013) highlight, in order to be given treatment people must demonstrate redemption and become, like Barry, responsible patient citizens, reflexively aware and evangelical about the costs and benefits of treatments. Barry's ability to adopt this identity was key to treatment access and demonstrated how he was able to manage his body in a way that does not waste government resources. This imperative was driven home to Barry when the medical specialist looking after him said, "*the only reason you're being put forward first for this at this moment in time is because you've spent so many months clean*". Those who attain the morally laudable status of "*clean*" are therefore offered the treatment alongside the threat that failing to maintain one's moral status by "*decid[ing] to lose your head again*" would mean that "*this treatment won't be offered to you again*". Disciplining one of the most fundamental pleasures of sex – the loosing of oneself in another – leads to the pleasure of sex dissipating. Yet medicine does not operate as a hierarchical form of power where professionals control patients, it also controls its workers via ideas of how the bodies of the professional should also be managed.

### *Charles*

In contrast to Barry, for Charles the regulatory structures of medicine carried a quasi-judicial function. Charles was a 42 year old senior nurse, he was bisexual and up until two years before our first interview he had balanced a wife, child, and an active sex life that sometimes included chemsex, mostly with men but sometimes with women. This was until he was outed by two sex workers who sold their story to a tabloid newspaper. As a result of this Charles had given up his job as a senior nurse and had gone to work for a pharmaceutical company for which he had previously done small amounts of consultancy. Charles therefore remained comfortable financially and despite now living separately from his wife and child he was able to afford a medium sized flat, and then more latterly a small house. When I first interviewed Charles he was under investigation by the nursing regulator who had suspended his licence to practice. He was also under criminal investigation for supplying drugs, but these charges were later downgraded to a lesser charge of possession for which he received a conditional discharge. However, the actions of the nursing regulator proved to be a more dominant force in his life. The long and protracted investigation required that he remained under the care of a psychiatrist, and that he provided random but frequent urine and hair samples to test for drug use. Charles, like others in his position, was placed under a form of panoptical surveillance where power operates not through the direct supervision by a person in authority, but instead by being made to feel one is always potentially always being observed. The efficiency of such a system lies in the observed coming to police their own actions. Charles was required to maintain his own sobriety.

However, he stated that his sobriety was solely for the investigation, with the aim of being readmitted to the register. Upon readmission, he planned to apply for voluntary erasure, allowing him the option (should he ever wish to) to re-register as a nurse in the future.

As our interviews progressed, so did the proceedings of the nursing regulator, leaving Charles able to apply for voluntary erasure. At roughly the same time, Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) for HIV became available from the NHS. For Charles, fear of acquiring HIV had been another factor disciplining his sexuality, and had long served as an inhibitor of him engaging in the bareback sex that often accompanied chemsex. Yet even with both these factors no longer relevant to him he was clear that any sex with drugs still had to be "*good fun*". In other words, he did not begin a chemsex binge the minute the disciplinary mechanisms of a nursing regulator and the threat of HIV were lifted. As such the disciplinary mechanism of chemsex only achieved a subversive performative compliance.

By the time of the third interview he developed a loving and sexual friendship with two other men (he never quite called either a partner), one in his 20s another in his 30s, both French. The three of them both spent time at his house, as well as on holiday together in Italy and Spain. It was clear they brought a lot of joy to one another. In his wider life, he noted he had "*got family time back*" and was able to spend quality time with his wife and daughter, despite the fact they no longer lived together.

Whilst Charles managed to navigate most other aspects of his life around it without significant material hardship, he remained clear that the tabloid news story was the moment "*everything changed*" causing the "*10 year stability*" he had been enjoying to come to an end. Importantly, however, the tabloid press only has the power to affect life in such a dramatic way because of the broader discursive apparatus that surrounds chemsex. For example, in an early article in *The Guardian* (a left leaning British newspaper) experts issued vague "warnings" about "chem-sex parties" (Travis, 2014), whilst around the same time the *PinkNews* (a LGBT+ specialist left leaning newspaper) made unsupported claims about links to "a disturbing rise in HIV infections" (Roberts, 2014). All of this highlights a similar dynamic at work: individuals must consume these warnings and learn the correct way to manage the body and its pleasures. If they fail to do so then they will become subjected to practices of visibility that both produce a moral panic (for others to learn from) but that also enable profit to be extracted from sensationalist news stories to (re)create a conservative economy (Greenslade, 2004).

### *Shame*

Shame was another key discourse that came across in several interviews. With Seamus it almost formed an atmosphere in the room. He was one of the older interview participants at 49. He was a White Irish Catholic and whilst he claimed that he no longer felt shame about his sexuality, he somewhat ambiguously said he would "*find it very difficult to talk [about my sexuality] to just my work colleagues*

*or something like that*". At the start of the interview, we negotiated in some detail how to keep Seamus' identity confidential. In part he ensured this himself by never going into detail about aspects of his life that might identify him. For example, when asked him about his work he said "*I work in a hospital. And it's another guilty fact to my thing as well, it goes against everything that we practise and things like that. I'm being very honest with you*". Seamus never told me what job he did in the hospital, he only gave hints about the things he saw and occasionally specific tasks he did. Despite this I was never in any doubt about the veracity of what Seamus told me. As the interview progressed, he said things like:

> "*I think it's more magnified for me working in a hospital because I see it quite a lot… the people I work with are absolutely beautiful, fantastic people, and fantastic colleagues, and I that I feel I let them down, in my way, by doing what I'm doing*".

Slowly he disclosed that his 'hospital work' meant he had a reasonably detailed knowledge about safe injection practices and how to be "*good at it*". However, because of the shame he felt, he worried about what would happen if he injected someone and that he'd "*be done… for killing this person as well*" and so despite having these skills secondary to his work he would not "*inject people*". He even extended this anxiety to "*being in the same company*" as people who were injecting, thus completely detaching himself from even being able to give supervision.

In such ways, shame and the quasi-judicial disciplinary apparatuses we saw earlier with Charles overlap and reinforce one another, resulting in greater potential for harm because of the omission of good quality injecting advice being passed on from one sub-culture (a hospital/medical setting) to another (chemsex).

### *Algorithmic power*

In a digital age, Erwin (2015) notes that computer algorithms operate their disciplinary effects by gathering and analysing vast quantities of interlinked data on our computers and internet browsing history so as to take on a predictive quality and direct people's behaviours. This became particularly apparent during this research where merely talking about chemsex with research participants and friends resulted in adverts like those in Figure 2.1 appearing on my Facebook feed.

My academic discussions of chemsex had drawn me into a disciplinary apparatus that could have no idea whether I was actually involved in chemsex or not. Instead, as Jensen (2020) and Matzner (2017) note, social media algorithms were analysing my social media conversations, posts, and possibly even location, to predict what I *might* go on to do, and to *correct* this before anything correctable had occurred. Via such means, discipline is no longer a matter of controlling chemsex after the event so as to ensure an individual remains healthy after having participated in it. Instead, chemsex is disciplined in a pervasive but subtle fashion by algorithms that predict and seek to prevent 'undesirable' effects ever happening.

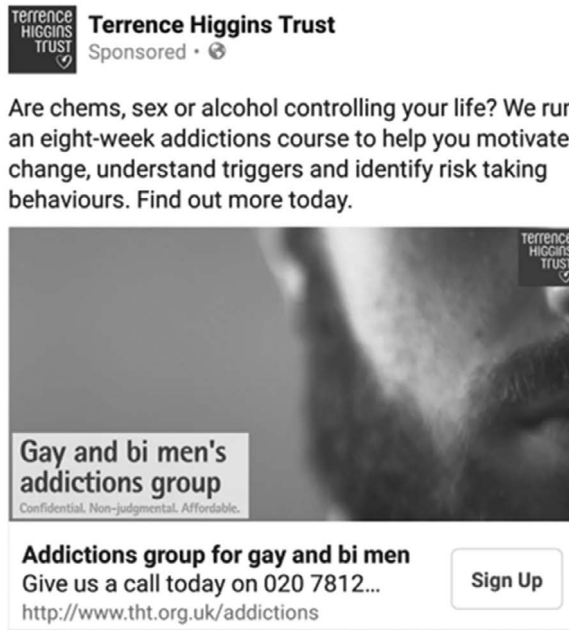


*Figure 2.1* Facebook advert for Terrence Higgins Addictions Group.

As individuals and consumers, we may feel we are free to choose whether we take up the services of a particular business or charity, but in the case of activities such as chemsex, the algorithmic choices presented to use are dramatically narrowed. A cursory look at how Google transforms the word 'chemsex' into a searchable list of items quickly reveals a list of healthcare organisations offering support and advice on how to stay safe, media organisations crafting moral panic, or the police highlighting the boundaries between arrestable and non-arrestable circumstances involving drugs.

The website the post in Figure 2.1 was linked to encourages the reader to question themselves: "Are chemsex, sex, or alcohol controlling your life?". The website continues by stating that the Addictions Group is a meeting place for people who are "questioning their use of drugs, alcohol, sex, chemsex, or any other compulsive behaviour". The last part of this sentence immediately positions chemsex within a psychopathological discursive framework by re-defining it as a "compulsive" practice. This transformation in chemsex closely parallels what Foucault speaks of in relation to the proliferation of discourses about sex that occurred throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. The result of this is that to talk of sex is: "no longer a question [of] simply saying what was done – the sexual act – and how it was done; but of reconstructing it" (Foucault, 1990: pg 63). In this way, chemsex is reconstructed as something compulsive, that has to be confessed to, and which encourages subjects to question whether their engagement in it is potentially problematic, even when it may not be.

But algorithmic forms of surveillance go even further in re-defining through processes of "interrupting and redirecting" (Erwin, 2015: pg 41) any mention of chemsex so as to pre-emptively discipline the gay man who is involved (in any way) in chemsex. There is no suggestion on the Terrence Higgins Trust website or the associated Facebook post that chemsex or alcohol may (at times) be pleasurable, and that their pleasure – at least in part – derives from their ability to let people loosen control of the self. Instead, the reader is implored to question the self, search their desires, and reconstruct themselves in relation to the demands of a disciplinary apparatus – one which pre-emptively constructs chemsex as something that is always and already pathological.

No longer though is pathology something which is painful or life limiting. Instead, as Jensen (2020) argues, internet algorithms become a means to transform pathology into profitable enterprises. Anyone seeking to become further enmeshed in this algorithmic disciplinary apparatus is invited to donate to Terrence Higgins Trust (a long standing UK based HIV charity) an apparently compulsory £160 if they earn above £25 000, £120 if they are employed but earned less than £25 000, and £40 if they are currently unemployed. Not only has the algorithm transformed chemsex into something that requires searching the self to find addiction, once it has been found it transforms the discovery into a productive enterprise in which one pays to talk oneself further into the disciplinary apparatus. We are always and already becoming complicit in a disciplinary apparatus that circulates in ever tighter circles between the lived experience, media and literary representations, and algorithmic processes. Chemsex is no longer an activity that intensifies the pleasures experienced between bodies. It is one which the disciplinary apparatus seeks to monitor and control, whilst at the same time extracting capital from it. In consequence, chemsex is no longer imbued with a sense of adventure, as Gooch represented it. Instead, it is one in which the worlds of gay men become controlled by disciplinary machines that straddle the material and algorithmic. The very definition of chemsex becomes increasingly narrow, pleasure is derived solely from controlling health, and visibility is limited to a self-enforcing representation that makes it more visible but less amenable to producing the sort of commonality described by Gooch.

## Recognising the trap

Chemsex, as explored throughout this chapter, has become increasingly visible in recent years through its connections to science, labour, the medical gaze, shame, and algorithms. This enhanced visibility serves to reinforce boundaries concerning what constitutes acceptable pleasure and sexuality, trapping chemsex in narrow definitions focused on pathology, danger, damage and destruction. Yet as Foucault argues, visibility is itself a trap – by making chemsex visible, disciplinary mechanisms exert control and limit the full spectrum of pleasures to be found through drug enhanced communality and connection. Thinking productively about the contradiction between pleasure and containment may require us not to demonise

visibility altogether, but rather to find possibilities that make chemsex connect with new ideas and new forms of narrative. By loosening rigid classifications, engaging with the nuances of bodies and pleasures, and developing counter discourses, it may be possible to move more freely within the trappings of power. The first step in doing so successfully, however, involves acknowledging the trap – and recognising how visibility has been weaponised against chemsex through moralising and pathologising narratives. Only once this is done will it be possible to appreciate some of the moral lessons that chemsex itself can teach us.

## Note

1 A detailed review of AIDS representations is beyond the scope of this book, but an excellent analysis of many of these issues can be found in Pearl (2015) *AIDS Literature and Gay Identity: The Literature of Loss.*

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Chapter 3

# Trauma-tragedy disciplinary apparatus

## Trauma and chemsex

Trauma and chemsex are tied together in a variety of ways. Some authors provide a framework for understanding trauma and chemsex by invoking the past trauma of the AIDS crisis that the gay community endured. This heightens moral panic about chemsex and ties it to ideological and political frameworks, thereby engaging in what Kagan (2018) identified as the "re-crisis" of both homophobic and AIDS narratives into chemsex narratives. In Eli Sanders' (2005) interview with Peter Staley (a prominent member of ACTUP New York), crystal methamphetamine is viewed by Staley as producing trauma that is contiguous with the AIDS crisis, with Staley saying that crystal methamphetamine was "making people sick, killing people, destroying lives, destroying careers, destroying relationships." He then describes how, having survived the AIDS pandemic himself, he was "brought to [his] knees by meth." In so doing, Staley recycles earlier panic around HIV and AIDS but heightens it by suggesting that whilst he survived AIDS an even more powerful force (of meth) weighs down upon him. For Staley, gay men are turning to this powerful drug in response to the "issues" they have faced growing up in a society characterised by community hatred towards them, with the "burden of the way society has raised us" asking people to question why they hate themselves. Ultimately Staley says he wishes to stigmatise meth use to the point of producing an engrained community hatred towards it. This strong political commitment, inspired by the AIDS pandemic, highlights and heightens the traumas of meth use in order to eradicate it from the gay community. Similar narratives can be found in Stuart's work (described in Chapter 1) and Barbara Speed's work (described in Chapter 5).

More recently chemsex has become more clearly linked to trauma by authors such as Stephen Morris (2019) who (drawing from the pop psychology of Matthew Todd, 2016 book *Straight Jacket*) argues that gay men come to "perceive that they are fundamentally defective" with such perceptions manifesting themselves in "depression, suicidality and negative feelings" (Morris, 2019: pg 44). Morris, having worked as the lead for chemsex and crime with the probation service in London, explores how trauma results in chemsex via two case studies. One of these case studies focuses on Anton, a person whom Morris gives us no background

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information other than that: "there was no escape from the abuse he [had] experienced from his father" (Morris, 2019: pg 45) which led him to develop a sense of claustrophobia that precluded him from enjoying himself in gay bars. His entire subjectivity as represented by Morris therefore is bound by trauma. This fully trauma-bound subject then began to instead attend chemsex parties where drugs enabled him to "hardly recall this feeling of vulnerability and suffocation" (Morris, 2019: pg 45). Yet what is missing in this narrative is any suggestion that Anton himself ever drew any links between his childhood trauma and chemsex. Instead, Morris makes the links for the reader on behalf of Anton, saying that his childhood trauma led to a "series of self-management techniques" (Morris, 2019: pg 45) in which chemsex became a form of self-medication. This is a strongly ideological reading of chemsex which views it as rooted in the traumas associated with internalised homophobia.

Both Staley and Morris may be said therefore to be engaging in what Davis and Dean (2022) term "traumatology," in which there is a "strong ideological and political commitment to the diagnostic naming of trauma even in situations where the individual has never construed their past trauma may be at the root of their present suffering" (Davis & Dean, 2022: pg 119). In neither of these cases were any clear links made between past traumas and engagement in chemsex, yet trauma is part of the disciplinary apparatus used to explain (and ultimately try to eliminate) chemsex. As I will explore with the case of Barry below, this framework can come to shape people's understandings of their chemsex in particularly homogenous and retroactive ways.

## Barry

Barry chose to meet me at a coffee shop in the Northern Quarter in Manchester, a place known for its artistic and artisanal atmosphere, a setting that matched his personality, skill set, and personal history. As we spoke, he showed me some exquisite drawings made on his iPad which he said helped him express his feelings. They all centred around drug use and his mental health. He was the same age as me at the time, 32, and white. He had lived in Manchester since he moved to university at 18, having come from a working-class and Catholic area of a nearby city that had little in the way of a gay community. As such, moving to Manchester offered him the possibility of making gay friends and lovers.

As we spoke, he told me that he had worked in the Northern Quarter for many years, ending up as the manager of a hospitality and events business. However, he no longer did that job and was currently living rent free with a female friend in the south of Manchester, for which he felt exceedingly guilty. He told me that he had previously had a large group of friends, but she was now the only person he had contact with since after he had been sectioned and admitted to a mental health ward for his drug addiction. At the time of the interview, he was five months sober from alcohol and drugs; he sporadically attended various support groups but

did not find them particularly helpful. He continued to smoke cannabis from time to time to manage his anxiety. He told me that whilst the woman he was living with was a close friend, he had not spoken to her about the details of his chemsex, and that I was the first person that he had talked to about it at length. He noted his friend did not really understand the intricacies of gay culture, citing that discussing "*the type of porn that I wank to*" with her simply felt uncomfortable. Despite this, at the start of the interview, it was obvious he was extremely nervous; his brow was sweating, he made little eye contact, and he seemed unsure about what to say, stating: "*I really don't know how we're meant to conduct this because I feel like I'm just going to ramble*." I responded saying it was my role as an interviewer to "*start asking things and starting to make sense of where you've come from, where you're going to*." For Barry, this seemed to resonate; he clearly remained conflicted about why he did chemsex and what its effects were, but was keen "*to fathom all that out basically so I can give my head a bit more understanding and I can stop shaming myself*." As the interview progressed, I asked fewer and fewer questions, and he gave lengthier answers. What emerged was a narrative of trauma that contains resonances with what Morris outlined above. However, as Croisy (2006: pg 99) has noted, whilst "we are to speak about certain traumatized bodies and point out the specificity of their traumas … we are also compelled to prevent their unhealthy and unproductive pedestalization." In other words, if we are to approach trauma and its representation ethically, we need to remain critically aware of the processes of representation we engage in – myself included.

As the interview progressed, Barry explained that his chemsex practices became entwined in a particularly abusive relationship in which his boyfriend beat him until he agreed to take part in orgies. He would then be "*passed around by lads all night*"; if he began to object, he was just given more drugs with the intent to placate and coerce him, up to and including making him unconscious. He noted that his addiction was "*not the same as the other [straight] men…*" who were in hospital with him, all of whom were being treated for heroin addiction, nor was he able to present himself as the stereotypical good-time gay best friend, taking coke on a night out with a bunch of female friends. He found it impossible to explain to staff on the ward that his drug use centred around "*injecting crystal meth into your arms in your bedroom*," and he was frustrated that he still got "*the same treatment like everyone else*" whilst he was on the ward. Much of this finds synergy with the extended campaign by David Stuart (former lead for chemsex services at a London sexual health clinic, discussed extensively in Chapter 1) and others who argue that chemsex is qualitatively different to other forms of drug use and that gay men therefore require specialist services. Barry's experience in which he was unable to explain himself suggests that this holds true for some people, but a critical approach must be taken to understanding how the disciplinary apparatus of trauma and tragedy (de)legitimises ways of talking about chemsex for gay men using such services. In other words, it is important to critique the simultaneously productive and restrictive potential of these narratives beyond their intended (and laudable) purpose of enhancing service provision for an underserved minority.

### Retroactive trauma

As the interview progressed, it was clear that trauma would form a central theme, but how trauma came retroactively to shape understandings of chemsex was (at least in part) a product of the interview process which itself was influenced by the trauma-tragedy disciplinary apparatus. Barry said that when he was in hospital he felt that healthcare staff were trying to "*sell a concept of life being a beautiful, wonderful thing [that] could be restored*." He fundamentally disagreed with this, citing that he had "*grown up very differently [to other] people*" and that therefore for him suicide should be something that people should be allowed to do. His explanation of this "*difference*" is best quoted at length:

> *… life itself has not been very kind in the sense that I was abused by my dad. He put me in hospital so many times as a kid because he just didn't like the fact he had a gay son. I'm the youngest of four children. I've got two older brothers and an older sister. My dad was just so abusive. He wasn't that bad with the rest of them. He was hard, and he was hard on himself, but he just took such a disliking to me because he just didn't like his little feminine son. So that was the start of things. And then I got put into hospital when I was eight years old because he fractured my skull, he broke my lungs and smashed my chest in and things like that because he stood on me. So, I was in intensive care from eight years old… that was the only time that the police and social services actually said this man's a danger to his kids. I'm the only one who'd been telling the police and social services this for years. So then when we got moved away from him, I must have been about ten, and I spent my whole life just watching my brothers and sister being… they're not normal. I wouldn't give them normal, but they're very well-adjusted people. I understand that the things that were inflicted upon me as a child weren't anything to do with my fault, but it was enough to fuck my head up.*

Barry was clear from the start of the interview that he "*just didn't know how to put it all down properly… I just have to find ways to process this better*." This, coupled with his comments about not being able to explain himself to the nurses in rehab, left a repeated desire to be able to present trauma and chemsex to others (myself, and healthcare professionals) in an intelligible way. By this point in the research, I was familiar with arguments surrounding the link between internalised homophobia and the apparent compulsion to engage in chemsex. Whilst I was (and do remain) critical of them as grand narratives for explaining the causes and problems of chemsex, Barry's story appeared so typical that roughly halfway through the interview I commented:

> *Some people I've been speaking to, they've used the drugs and they've not been using them to cope with something, and it kind of sounds more like you were…*

Until this point in the interview, Barry had not made any suggestion that he was using drugs as a coping mechanism at all. Instead, there were multiple occasions on which he described chemsex as being a pleasurable experience. Before he met the abusive boyfriend, he had enjoyed having chemsex regularly with a gay couple. He also spoke about the special feeling he experienced in the smouldering embers of a chemsex session, where everyone was naked and just talking about life. In such settings, he felt understood and normal. Yet despite this, the interview progressed towards an understanding of chemsex that was rooted in reactions to trauma. Having myself installed the idea of chemsex as a coping mechanism, Barry noted sometime later on in the interview that during the interview he had had a

> *fucking revelation, because, as I say, I know I've not had an easy life, and a lot of it coming up to the age of 30 just wasn't my fault. Things have happened that are completely out of my grasp… I obviously have been using it to sort of block out that. I'm just a fucking junkie aren't I?*

Whether this was to prove an enduring and productive revelation for Barry remains unknown; he was one of the few participants who only completed one interview, and his reasons for dropping out of the study are unaccounted for. I can only hope that giving him space to talk helped him. Despite this empirical impasse, what this interview demonstrates is the process of binding and unbinding described by Davis and Dean (2022) in relation to trauma and sex. Drawing from authors as diverse as Freud, Laplanche, and Ranciere, they suggest binding intense emotions to control them "confers psychological satisfaction of coherence" (Davis & Dean, 2022: pg 24). This binding can occur both at the level of the individual and society. The above interview offers a clear example where both interviewer and interviewee, having felt a sense of overwhelming emotions, came to bind these with a "language that offers a conceptual vocabulary" (Davis & Dean, 2022: pg 24) such as internalised homophobia and trauma. Ultimately the binding that occurs through language begins to become a "mechanism of group formation and establishment of social, as well as subjective, borders" (Davis & Dean, 2022: pg 24). In contrast, unbinding offers a release from the narratives of sex, sexuality, and self "which sparks an exhilaration of transgressing limits – including one's own – that may be alluring during sex" (Davis & Dean, 2022: pg 24). This is the process described in detail in Chapter 4, where the secure boundaries of one's body begin to be loosened at a chemsex party; but so too were the examples Barry gave of feeling connection to others in the embers of a chemsex session. Such actions unbounded Barry from the normative structures of society that so often failed to offer meaning for him.

Subjecting the experiences of chemsex to narratives of trauma is therefore a double-edged sword. Whilst it may bind those difficult emotions, providing a necessary sense of psychological coherence, it can also quickly ripple through the social body to preclude (partially or fully) other interpretations and experiences of chemsex. It must be remembered that one of the most pleasurable

experiences of sex is to feel unbounded and that this is often heightened during chemsex. Yet if the surrounding culture that represents chemsex does so in ways similar to Staley, then becoming unbound by chemsex becomes a risky experience which may open one's psychosexual history up to being relentlessly rewritten by tragedy. In such cases, the process of being unbounded can induce anxiety which as Davis and Dean (2022) note can quickly result in the subjects and objects of the experience becoming hated and rejected. All the above can begin to form a disciplinary loop: those with access to the apparatus of representation begin to represent the anxiety they experience when they feel unbounded by chemsex, experiencing this as traumatic; in doing so, they represent chemsex as tragedies and imbibe it with a sense of fear, stigma, and hatred; this then comes to constitute the cultural representations of chemsex consumed by the wider gay community rewriting (partially but increasingly fully) the experiences of feeling unbounded by chemsex; these experiences can then come to inform the cultural texts that are produced by those who produce representations of chemsex thus completing the loop in ever tighter circles.

## Transforming trauma into tragedy

Patrick Strudwick is one of the most compelling journalists to write about chemsex. During his extensive career, he has covered many pertinent topics in the UK and abroad with regard to the current sociopolitical issues oppressing gay men. Whilst some may find some of his writing sensationalist, this would be prematurely dismissive of his skilled crafting of emotions in a well-honed literary style. One piece in particular (Strudwick, 2018) highlights his skilled ability to work closely with those that he is representing, drawing out some of the deepest, most complex, and most painful emotions up to and including inconsolable grief. For Strudwick, this reporting is not from an entirely detached perspective, since he wrote on X (formerly Twitter) on 8 September 2019 that his first boyfriend ended up in a five-day coma because of chemsex. When Strudwick learned about this, he was struck by a heightened motivation to explore and to represent what he calls "the darker side of chemsex," culminating in his 2019 Channel 4 Dispatches documentary *Sex, Drugs and Murder*. However, Strudwick had written several pieces about chemsex before this documentary, with the most comprehensive and emotional accounts in his description of the death of Paddy, a 21-year-old gay man from Eastbourne on the South Coast of England. Strudwick (2018) writes about Paddy from the perspective of his father, mother, and brothers who are mourning his death. The precise medical details of his death as revealed in the coroner's inquest are not reported by Strudwick, although the reader is left in no doubt that the family attributed it to an overdose of GBL[1] (gamma-butyrolactone). The painful moments of his death, however, are recounted with a clinical level of detail that captures the sense of how indelibly the pain of Paddy's death was written on the minds of those who witnessed it. Moving from the hope of Paddy making a recovery, we are led into the minute details of his last moments of life: how he

breathed his last breaths, the rising and falling of his chest, seeing his heart beat rapidly and strongly before slowing and stopping, and finally the words spoken by his Mum and his brother after his heart had stopped. Such details paint an image so clear as to echo how people describe the reliving of traumatic episodes in cases of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Through Strudwick's writing, one becomes drawn into the ICU room that Paddy was in with his family when he died; the images painted result in a swell of emotions being transferred to the reader. Once Paddy's death has been described, and the emotions transferred to the reader, the facts are laid out to begin to construct the deeper causes of Paddy's dying: first, that Paddy was bullied for being gay when he was young; second, that he started using drugs and running away from home when he was 15; and third, that he had a difficult home life when he was young because of his father's poor mental health.

Following the conventions of tragedy that dictate that the protagonist must be an otherwise noble person who the audience can find pity with (Golden, 1976), Paddy is presented as the son of a doctor and a nurse, having lived an early life of happiness that brought a sense of joy and adventure to those who met him. The tragedy of his downfall is then presented as rooted in factors over which he had little control, a downfall he did not deserve, and one which people like ourselves (the audience of gay men who read Strudwick's work) could also undeservedly experience. The intense emotions conveyed in this piece of writing, combined with how it encourages the gay men to identify with them, means that the audience can no longer maintain a sense of distance to Paddy. Instead, the tragedy of Paddy's death becomes something that we (as gay men) must discipline ourselves to avoid. The suggestion put forward to achieve this in Strudwick's piece is to increase the criminal punishments for GHB possession and supply. By such means, the trauma of Paddy's death is transformed into a literary tragedy which calls for gay men to be subjected to more intense regulation via the criminal justice system. Were Strudwick's article to be the only example of trauma being transposed into tragedy, it would not form a cohesive system, however, such pieces are multiple. Gay men have themselves come to desire and produce "the very thing that dominates and exploits them" (Foucault, 1977: pg xii) by producing a plethora of tragic representations of chemsex. One of these, Michel Marion's (2016) film *G O'clock*, ends in the protagonist being fucked whilst comatose (or possibly dead) secondary to GBL. Another, Peter Darney's (2015) *5 Guys Chilling*, ends with one man unconscious (again secondary to GBL use) who is then used as a prop for two other guys to fuck each other against, while another details, after just snorting a line of drugs, the lesson we must learn from this tragic scene.

> Having a monogamous relationship in London is near impossible these days… before mephedrone and G and all these drugs came on-board, relationships lasted… I used to love movies. I never watch them any more… I guess for me, I see it for what it is… guys that are twirling around in their shorts, dancing,

> having a good time, because they're hot and high, and all I see is, a lot of pain… you're going to be sitting on Sunday night, watching The X Factor with your feet up on the coffee table and you'll have to forget that someone was fucking on that table there
>
> (pg 53–54)

Highlighting the tropes of disillusionment and disconnection, the narrator constructs an idealised past which is now inaccessible because of the underlying pain and emptiness. In his account, he underscores the connection that we the audience must learn between unbridled pleasure, regret, and repression. The audience must reflect that happiness is only accessible if we reject chemsex and (somehow) return to an imagined past of monogamy and movies. The urgent need to achieve this impossible return to an imagined and idealised past is driven violently home by films in which the teleological drive is towards the sobering warning of death. In Gage Oxley's (2017) film, *This World We Live In*, the protagonist dies secondary to a drug overdose, choking on his own vomit, reaching out for his mother whilst memories of a happy childhood flash by on screen. When combined together, the messages from all of these tragedies, written and produced by gay men, come to discipline those who view them to think, feel, and represent chemsex in ways so aligned with the trauma-tragedy disciplinary apparatus that it becomes increasingly difficult for the chemsexing gay man to engage in nuanced and meaningful conversation about what he is doing and why. What emerges is a tragedy-trauma disciplinary apparatus which whilst starting with events such as deaths and sexual assaults becomes so pervasive as to transform the representational apparatus of chemsex. In such a context, it is perhaps unsurprising even the most banal of experiences can become reinscribed as trauma.

## Tragedy producing trauma

One of the clearest examples of banal writings on chemsex comes from James Wharton, a gay man who can broadly be characterised as heavily investing himself and profiting from the homonormative structures of society. His first book *Out in The Army* (Wharton, 2013) documents his entry into the British Army. As argued by Puar (2007), the political project of including gay men in the army has depoliticised gay liberation itself, making it more about assimilation into heteronormative power structures rather than expanding ways of living that gay men (and other queers) had developed. The depoliticisation of gay identity can be clearly seen in Wharton's writings immediately after *Out in The Army* where he argued against gay saunas, saying "the convening of gay men for participation in sex of shades various and in groups of all sizes rather revolts me" (Wharton, 2014). By his own admission, this whipping up of revulsion (which can only operate by constructing gay sexual liberation as aberration) "helped [him] secure further writing work" (Wharton, 2017: pg 57). Using this financial and cultural capital, Wharton then moved on to write about chemsex in his book *Something for the Weekend*

(Wharton, 2017). He claims to write from an insider perspective whilst simultaneously situating himself as adopting an outsider middle-class stance by noting that prior to chemsex he led a "normal life" (Wharton, 2017: pg 55): having two dogs, a husband, and a cottage in Windsor (a wealthy west London suburb). He also claims the people he sees engaging in chemsex also have normal jobs, being lawyers, doctors, and parliamentary researchers. Writing about one particular experience in London, he describes "being intimate and sharing minor sexual contact with a nice guy" only for that person to move on to someone else which Wharton describes as a "traumatic experience" (Wharton, 2017: pg 207).

Whilst narratives like Barry's certainly demonstrate that traumas can occur within the chemsex scene, for Wharton to call the cessation of "intimacy" with a new sexual partner at a group sex party "traumatic" is one of the clearest examples of the re-coding of banal and quotidian gay sexual experiences as trauma. Yet it is his investment in and access to the apparatus of representation that makes this somewhat tenuous link between failed intimacy and trauma seamless and logical and enhances rather than diminishes his claims. Naomi Klein (2000) in *No Logo* notes that branding has moved beyond products to include personal identities, leading individuals to commodify themselves to align with market-driven narratives that provide access to profitable forms of representation. Wharton, having established his position within the representational framework of respectable homosexuality by supporting the British Army and distancing himself from gay saunas, makes his claims of experiencing "trauma" in the chemsex scene within a discursive apparatus that legitimises and widely disseminates his experiences. In this way, even the most banal of sexual disappointments become validly representable as "trauma", written up as tragedy, and are used to teach us lessons about how to be normal, respectable, Army-supporting, sober, white, monogamous, non-sauna visiting, gay men. Whilst there is no moral necessity for Wharton (or anyone else) to publicly proclaim antecedent trauma(s), there is an ethical responsibility for how trauma is invoked as an explanatory framework (Borg, 2018). As such, more reflexive and critical engagements with trauma are needed.

## Dustan

The sexual disappointments and dissatisfactions of the white middle classes need not always craft disciplinary loops that lead gay men towards increasingly homonormative lives. To explore the potential for an alternative world, I turn first to the work of novelist Guillaume Dustan. Dustan, born William Baranès,[2] was a graduate of political science who went on to become a tribunal judge in Paris, only to come to give this up when he found out he was HIV positive, turning instead to become an essayist and novelist. Dustan's first set of largely autobiographical novels focus on the intersections of sex (both with and without condoms), drugs, bodies, and music in Paris in the late 1990s. Clerc (2021) notes that Dustan rejects any sense of creating a tidy sense of homosexuality aligned with homonormative ideals. Instead, there is an immediacy in Dustan's writing which those familiar with

the non-monogamous pleasures of cosmopolitan homosexuality may find enticing, whilst those less familiar may find alienating. To create this sense of immediacy, Dustan pays what Clerc refers to as a neoclinical level of detail to all aspects of gay life in Paris describing "his life as directly as possible, practically live" with "continuous narration in first person present" (Clerc, 2021: pg 12). Everything is given intense but emotionally disinterested narration: from douching through to the organisation of his sex toys and drugs in his bedroom; from the pleasures of anonymous darkroom sex to the at times tempestuous relationships between the men in his world. Nothing sexual escapes Dustan's descriptions, especially the copious quantities of drugs he takes. Yet unlike the Foucauldian gaze where clinical narration aims to produce a system of language and practices that regulate the individual into a compliant medical subject, there is no external force which is produced by Dustan's narration. References are made of an outside world where people go to work, but beyond acknowledging the existence of this alternative world, Dustan's sex-drug-club world of gay men is self-sufficient. There is also little space for reflection on the self which psychoanalytical structures may demand; instead, the world Dustan creates is one where the physical pleasures of being are axiomatic, immediate, and most importantly the only thing that his world is capable of creating. This challenges Foucault's argument that making the invisible visible just produces ways to discipline sexuality. Dustan avoids this trap by writing with a force that makes everything so visible that there is little to no need for another "normal" life in relation to husbands, dogs, and cottages that in turn can come to entrap and discipline.

Clerc argues that the energy underpinning this world-making activity is a "life threatened by death … [which] carried the name of AIDS" (Clerc, 2021: pg 41) which ultimately results in a "blasting apart of traditional normative frameworks and representations" (Clerc, 2021: pg 13). This is evident from the opening to Dustan's (2021) first book *In My Room* where he recounts a conversation with a lover Terrier who is also HIV positive. Dustan notes Terrier was having nightmares in which someone "nails down a coffin lid over him whilst he pushes against it hard but it never budges" (Dustan's, 2021: pg 50). Dustan writes that the moment Terrier shared with him this death-laden nightmare, his lover's nightmares stopped and the sex between them got better and better. Dustan then lives his Parisian gay life with a body thoroughly penetrated by drugs and dick, and where a life threatened by death produces rather than precludes immense and numerous pleasures.

Davis (2015) notes that Dustan's writing about bareback sex brought him into conflict with ACTUP Paris who viewed his writing about bareback sex as being in direct conflict with their condom-only messaging. Such characterisations fail to acknowledge how Dustan's neoclinical writings on bareback sex certainly at times highlighted its pleasures but also outlined the complexities and conflicts of using condoms. Despite the obvious nuance in Dustan's writing, ACTUP Paris characterised Dustan on posters as the "high priest of a little religion of risk taking" who argued for a bareback ideology (Davis, 2015: pg 145). Davis notes that such vilification even extended to the systematic destruction of his books under the guise of

ensuring an "exemplary lesson in safe sex" which amounted to "coercive normalisation" (Davis, 2015: pg 149) for gay men who failed to embody and advocate for the exemplary forms of safer sex that ACTUP militantly argued for. Anyone who failed became subjected to ACTUP Paris' highly sophisticated disciplinary apparatus, hitherto reserved for the likes of pharmaceutical companies who withheld or delayed life-saving drugs.

Dustan died on 3 December 2005 and was found two days later by friends. The cause of death remains unclear but has been suggested it may have been due to suicide or overdose (Preciado, 2013), or perhaps a pulmonary embolism (Clerc, 2021). Even in death, Dustan's writer friends resisted the desire to allow medicine to craft the definitive narrative; instead, his death not only remains unclear in its cause but also contested in its symbolism. Whilst Clerc (2005) wrote about how in death Dustan raised "awareness … of a completely sclerotic France,"[3] ACTUP Paris (2005) insisted in its obituary[4] that we "forget Dustan." Their obituary in fact does nothing to forget Dustan, but instead reinforces the coercive normalisation by remembering him in order to repress his memory. Throughout the obituary, ACT UP construct themselves as "doing everything" to campaign about and support people with AIDS, whilst Dustan is portrayed as a social pariah undoing everything by insisting on existing outside of their narrowly prescribed norms. His death, alone in an apartment, left to decompose for two days, is held up as a warning to "make us shiver about our own loneliness, our own disease" (ACT UP Paris 2005). ACT UP's writing about Dustan thereby becomes an act of remembering a tragic death so as to turn it into a disciplinary mechanism that plays into the fears of the lonely AIDS patient, rejected by his family, dying a lonely death: one which Dustan himself vehemently rejected. The only way to avoid this is to "forget" Dustan as he wanted to be remembered, and as his friends remembered him. His death is therefore welcomed by ACT UP Paris but is not complete enough. Instead, his death must be reinforced and even his memory must die through the (failed) act of forgetting.

## Disciplinary death

Both Paddy and Dustan's deaths come to be integrated into the trauma-tragedy disciplinary apparatus, primarily by virtue of the power that death holds over us to unbind the self: non-existence becomes an unbearable threat. Sociality is the basis for a liveable life; we become able to act by virtue of entering into social relationships with others. However, we must engage with others in intelligible ways (Butler, 1997, 2005). This intelligibility is produced by subjecting ourselves to the wide range of disciplinary apparatuses that exist in modern society. There is no outside of power, only the threat of non-existence that compels us to become subjected to it. Death is so powerful because it ruptures the sociality within which subjects become constituted (Butler, 2004). The power that this fear of non-existence leaves us with has so far been traced in two different ways. Both contain within them the pleasure of binding self and society back to a patterning that matches the extant

hegemonic structures that produce a coherent subject, intelligible to others, and liveable as a life. The power of the trauma-tragedy machine can be perfected when the deaths of those within chemsex sub-cultures become publicly dissected so that they become connected to and reinforce the wider disciplinary apparatus. Dustan's death, however, traced another route, one where the unbinding that death produces was held and embodied; its binding resisted in order to unbind the wider disciplinary apparatus pertaining to sex and drugs.

## Porosity

When Dustan's friend Tim found him two days dead in his apartment, Tim called Paul Preciado. Preciado documents these moments in his book *Testojunkie*. The desire to know, and to understand how and why Dustan died, was immediate but unanswerable: death undoes us in ways that we can never account for. The trauma of the grief and the rupture in the self were immediate for Preciado who cried and grieved with Tim. Up until this point, Preciado, Tim, and Dustan had been separate people, the boundaries of their egos laid out clearly on the page as securely separate. However, as grief starts to unbind Preciado because of the loss of the self that is found in others, the social ties that had bound Preciado and Dustan paradoxically become more powerful and begin to construct the narrative power of Preciado's writing. Dustan's "mind unfurls" around Preciado and "forms an electromagnetic layer" from which "words flow" (Preciado, 2013: pg 15). The secure sense of boundaries of the ego begins to come undone in the face of Dustan's death, yet rather than attempting to shore up a sense of self by becoming subjected to the binding powers of extant disciplinary apparatuses, Preciado remains unbound. There is a penetration of Preciado's body by Dustan's spirit which makes Preciado make the same facial and sexual gestures as Dustan had in life, and Dustan begins to flow into Preciado. What emerges is the book *Testojunkie*, a book that simultaneously expresses the trauma of death but also refuses to allow death to be transformed into a tragedy that reproduces and reinforces the disciplinary apparatuses pertaining to bodies, drugs, and sex. Instead, Preciado in writing *Testojunkie* engages with Dustan's death in a way that refuses to mourn his loss, instead allowing Dustan to penetrate the book with his neoclinical style to document a self-directed experiment of administering testosterone gel to their (hitherto identified as female) body. Preciado challenges societal constructions of their body and sex and to "avenge" (Preciado, 2013: pg 16) Dustan's death through challenging what life can be. In the same way that Dustan describes sex, drugs, and music in Paris, Preciado documents in great detail his experiments with testosterone. In writing about the first time he applied testosterone gel, he begins to transform his body, shaving hair and putting on a dildo which in turn is placed on Dustan's books, making contact with and obscuring the words on the page. These Dustanian autobiographical narrations are then interspersed with theoretical chapters exploring the nature of sex, drugs, and biopolitical subjectivity. It is the intersecting porosity of Preciado, testosterone, and Dustan's words that produce *Testojunkie*. In it, Preciado makes no

distinction between the affects that drugs can produce that seep in through skin and orifices, and the words which can enter through eyes and ears. For Preciado, both alter one's biochemical make-up and therefore form part of the *pharmakon* that alters one's perceptive abilities: both can be affecting and exert a power on subjects, and both interact to produce cultural scripts of bodies, sex, and drugs. They can all bind and unbind.

It is this insight that leads Preciado to develop a critique of how power has operated in increasingly diffused ways since World War Two and ultimately leads him to highlight potential avenues for resistance to the novel ways in which disciplinary mechanisms function. Developing Foucault's understanding of disciplinary power, Preciado argues that power now operates at the molecular level. For example, molecular power operates via a form of performative feedback where conditions such as depression, erectile dysfunction, and fertility all become transformed into marketable products such as Prozac, Viagra, and synthetic hormones. Chemsex is not immune to this molecularisation of power. For example, a study by Colfax et al. (2011) was one of the first to identify a biochemical means to treat chemsex. Rather than exploring chemsex as a complex phenomenon that requires the labour of friends and therapists to move from addiction to nuanced practice, patients are reduced to swallowing mirtazapine tablets, followed by measuring their urine for decreasing the amount of methamphetamine. This can best be understood in terms of Preciado's understanding of a form of power which operates down to the molecular level.

To return to Barry, whilst he never disclosed any medically led treatments that he might or might not have received, he was clear that he self-managed his anxiety through the use of cannabis, a not uncommon strategy which reflects the growing sale of cannabis as a means of managing and controlling affect (Soleymanpour et al., 2021). The solution to anxiety is therefore no longer the responsibility of society or even therapists but is instead shifted onto an individual body which must be self-modified via molecular treatments that have predictable and marketable effects. Other participants, whose past trauma offered a partial basis for their chemsex, were often prescribed psychotropic drugs often with little to no underpinning support from professionals or any other social structures[5]. The risk therefore was that no longer trauma was experienced as something that is felt and shared with others, offering opportunities for connection during moments when we find ourselves to be so disconnected. Instead, trauma finds itself connected to molecular-level disciplinary forces that are so efficient they only require patients to acquiesce and imbibe the power that is exerted upon them.

Whilst diagnosing the problem, Preciado also performs the solution. Holding Dustan's death not as a preclusion to experimentation with drugs but as an ethical call to "blast apart traditional narrative frameworks" (Clerc, 2021: pg 13), Preciado allows Dustan's words to enter him alongside his 50-mg packets of testosterone. Both intermingle to produce an experiment which resists the power structures they have critiqued. Sometimes he applies their contents most days, sometimes just a

couple of times a week, but always with the view of subverting the culturally inscribed meanings of sex and drugs. Intertwined with this experiment is their lover, only identified as "VD," whose sex scenes become recounted in Dustan's neoclinical subversively detailed writing style. In so doing, the pleasures of the body and the signification(s) of different body parts become challenged. Preciado, as someone initially identified as female at birth, lacks what they refer to as a biocock, but instead of reading this as some sort of body dysmorphia linked to the power structures of psychiatry for treatment, they allow both testosterone and what remains of Dustan, in the form of his words, to amplify the pleasurable geography of their body.

For Preciado, the penis, the hegemonic site of (straight) male pleasure, becomes a tongue, a hand, or a dildo, never being trapped in one place on the body and thus never becoming trapped by the cultural programming of testosterone. Preciado then broadens this critique to highlight that drugs are not just molecules, and it is not only molecules that are drugs: both operate as culturally constructed texts that can reinforce or resist the contemporary ways that power functions. Just as Dustan lived a life fighting death, in death what remains of his life fights the power structures that bind sex and drugs together. His body, which had "rotted for two days" (Preciado, 2013: pg 15), haunts the book as a reminder that the sclerosis of sex and drugs must be resisted and that the transformation of trauma into tragedy is not an inevitable one. Instead, trauma can serve as a powerful emotion to unbind the meanings of sex and drugs as always and already implicated in a trauma-tragedy disciplinary apparatus.

Disciplinary regimes and tragedy-trauma loops may not therefore always produce unending compliance, but the possibilities for resistance are so limited that a re-examination of the process of resistance to these regimes is necessary. Chapter 4 explores the surprising potentials of the body and its porosity that have been touched upon here, to produce and sustain connections which have hitherto been precluded by the linguistic machinery built up to discipline chemsex.

## Notes

1 A molecule that is endogenous to the human body, but as a pharmaceutical drug was developed and used to treat narcolepsy. It produces euphoric feelings useful for sexual encounters at lower doses. In larger doses, it has anaesthetic properties and can lead to respiratory depression and death. There is a small therapeutic window between its excitatory and anaesthetic effects, leading to it no longer being used in clinical practice, but that can easily lead to complications when administered too frequently or in too high doses. It is also used in industrial processes as an alloy cleaner that provides a widely used legal route for its production and distribution.

2 For a comprehensive and critically informed introduction to Dustan's life and works and writings, see Thomas Clerc's (2021) introduction to the retranslation of Dustan's novels by Daniel Maroun, as well as Clerc's (2005) moving obituary *Mon Coeur est mort (pour Guillaume Dustan)* in *Liberation*.

3 From the original "conscience… d'une France complètement sclérosée."
4 All quotes from the ACTUP Obituary are translated here into English from French by myself.
5 For a more detailed review of this, see Nagington and King (2022).

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Chapter 4

# The musicality of chemsex

## Resonances of chemsex

Queer theory has often (somewhat ironically) struggled to talk about sex (Dean, 2015). This may possibly be, at least in part, because heterosexuals run scared of queer sex when confronted with its materiality, yet tolerate it when it is intellectualised (Binnie, 1997). Yet, so often intellectual thinking about homosexuality and more latterly chemsex has relied on psychopathological models. Thinking of chemsex in terms of resonances of pleasure(s) offers us a way to engage deeply with the sexual elements of chemsex culture without recourse to psychological discourses which have poorly served gay men for generations. It also helps to explore how the boundaries we construct to try and contain chemsex are in fact always and already porous. To undertake this analysis, different tools will need to be applied than those that have been used before, ones that have been hiding in plain sight for some time.

Foucault's canonical queer theory text (1990) *The History of Sexuality Volume 1* posits two key ways of thinking about sex: *scientia sexualis* and *ars erotica*. The former aims to gain knowledge over sex through the individual via confessional structures (be these of the church or of a medical clinic) which results in the identification of a "great archive of pleasures" (Foucault, 1990: pg 63). In other words, *scientia sexualis* builds a discursive apparatus that slowly builds very specific power/knowledge frameworks for thinking about, experiencing, deploying, and controlling sexuality for productive means. In modern times and in relation to chemsex, this can be amply seen in the performance of demands to make chemsex more visible. In the call for papers for the 2nd European Chemsex Forum held in Berlin in 2018, the organisers implored attendees to remember that "chemsex will not go away if we don't talk about it" (European Chemsex Forum, 2018: pg 8). Whilst the forum more latterly has much nuanced its approach to also recognise the importance and value of chemsex, this comment is still revealing for how it is often necessary to articulate research and service provision in a way that aims to make chemsex "go away". In discussions at the 2024 Chemsex Forum, it became clears that this requirement can be even more acute in countries, where chemsex is more actively policed. Examples were given from countries such as Singapore

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where even harm reduction services have to advertise themselves as taking broadly prohibitionist approaches to make chemsex "go away", regardless of whether the providers of these services aligned themselves or not to this ideology. The *scientia sexualis* approach to chemsex is therefore one which can easily become co-opted into controlling and/or eliminating chemsex and echoes previous attempts control or eliminate of homosexuality. However, Foucault also identifies another approach to sexuality, *ars erotica* which aims to understand erotic pleasure "in relation to itself" by exploring "its reverberations in the body and soul" (Foucault, 1990: pg 57). In such approaches, there is not an attempt to dampen down or control the object of study; instead, there is an aim to find how objects and experiences of study productively resonate with one another. In doing so, analysis aims to centre pleasure and "[deflect it] back into the sexual practice itself… amplifying its effects" (Foucault, 1990: pg 57). This is the approach that I want to develop in relation to analysing chemsex so as to offer a way to break from the disciplinary apparatuses outlined thus far (science, labour, the medical gaze, shame, algorithms, and the trauma-tragedy loop) and to explore what chemsex teaches us about boundaries and their transgression. However, in order to do this, successfully another problem with contemporary academic discourse on sex must also be addressed, namely its privileging of the visual.

## Aural pleasures

Jodie Taylor (2018) identifies the visual bias in analyses of sexuality as being rooted in the work of Sigmund Freud who, she notes, only ever made reference to what is seen, and never to what one might hear. Yet, as Taylor notes, for some people, aurality plays a larger role in their sexuality than the visual, with music propelling "our bodies to act in ways that inform or enhance a sexual response" (Taylor, 2018: pg 3). For Taylor, there is therefore the possibility that for some people, music is sex (Taylor, 2012). However, what Taylor's theorisation of musico-sexual synergy misses out is the potential for music to resonate and amplify emotions other than pleasure. As Paul Morris and Susanna Paasonen (2014: pg 218) note, resonances can include "disgust, confusion, fascination" all of which "linger on" in the "loops of intensity" that resonate when they cross the boundaries of the body via the ear. Examining the resonances that occur between lived experiences and music therefore offers a way of moving away from the *scientia sexualis* of chemsex towards the *ars erotica*.

In order to develop this analysis, I will examine data from the empirical interviews alongside three key and somewhat interconnected films. The first is *Amphetamine* by Sonbert and Appell (1966) (which was co-directed by Appell but is always referred to as being Sonbert's first film). Sonbert was a talented teenager in relation to his understanding of film and, as his career developed, he became a keen contributor to critical commentary on film, opera, and music. After a successful career of teaching film and winning several awards, fellowships, and

international acclaim, Sonbert died in 1995 at the age of 47 from an AIDS-related illness (Gartenberg, 2015a). His work has been the subject of multiple retrospectives but until now has received little critical commentary in academia, particularly when compared to his contemporaries such as Warhol. *Amphetamine* was his first film, made in 1966 three years before the Stonewall Riots. As such, it was situated in a broader step change towards LGBT rights and representation in the USA (Armstrong & Crage, 2006), as well as a broader project of breaking the mould of Hollywood heteropatriarchal representations of gender and sexuality (Mulvey, 1975). At the time of its release, it received almost universal praise (Gartenberg, 2023) and it, along with several other films from his early career, quickly gave rise to critical acclaim. Gartenberg (2015b) notes that in his first two movies (*Amphetamine* and *Holiday*), Sonbert used musical soundtracks, followed by a 20-year hiatus of silent films. Gartenberg (2015b) argues that Sonbert, despite being a talented music critic, felt any accompanying sound "distracted from the musical and poetic rhythms of his montage films". However, I wish to argue that *Amphetamine* engages a 1960s Motown soundtrack to produce playful resonances that we see on screen but which also reverberate with Carl's experiences of chemsex some 50 years later.

The second film *Chemsex* was mentioned briefly in the introduction to this book. It was directed by Gogarty and Fairman (2015) and produced by Vice (a production company known for addressing edgy or so-called taboo topics). It was then picked up for international distribution by the LGBT+ specialists Peccadillo Pictures. It is almost certainly the most widely circulating film about chemsex, and when it was first screened, it resulted in a "multi-faceted panic discourse" across multiple sections of the British press, which Hakim eloquently describes as a condensing together elements of "moral panic, sex panic, and techno panic" (Hakim, 2018: pg 2–3). It is probably the only film about chemsex that straight people have seen, and it is certainly the most widely written about. The general tone of the film has been described as an "orgy of emotional triggers" combining "sensationalist genres of horror, social moralism, and sex panic" (Kagan, 2018: pg 129–130). There has been some commentary on the music with regard to its

> "eerie soundtrack by Daniel Marle [that] trains the viewer to lump [snorting, smoking and injecting methamphetamine] together as the same, disturbingly abject and sinister, phenomenon"
>
> (Race, 2015).

However, a close reading of the soundtrack has not been engaged in. I will explore how the music produces feelings of fear, but how at the same time, there is sympathy in the music with how Ryan describes his own strategic demonisation of chemsex. Whilst it would be a stretch to call *Chemsex* a pornographic film, parts of the film were shot by Liam Cole who is the director of the third film I want to address, *Slammed.*

*Slammed* was directed by Liam Cole (2012) and produced by Paul Morris. It is a pornographic film produced and distributed by Treasure Island Media, a gay porn

studio known for its joyous breaking of taboos, specifically the representation of bareback sex in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Several of the participants in my study were familiar with this film, with Sam noting it was a favourite "*to put on and play at chemsex parties, it just has the right vibe to it*". It is this vibe and how it is transmitted that is central to the analysis offered in this chapter.

*Slammed* is just under four hours long, and the major part of the film centres on Jon Phelps' experience of being "slammed" (a colloquial term for injecting drugs on the chemsex scene, usually referring to crystal methamphetamine, and/or mephedrone). It is the only Treasure Island Media film Jon ever appears in. For the scenes that he is in, there is a narrative of the idealised chemsex journey. He starts off with, and is accompanied on this journey, by Kieran (a Treasure Island Media regular actor) and then progresses through the night to a sex party to have (apparently) constantly high sex. What is not represented is almost as fanciful as what is: there is no endless waiting round for people to arrive or leave; nobody spends half the night on Grindr looking for a top or more drugs; there are no long drawn-out conversations and the tops that are present have almost constantly hard dicks.

The film teases the viewer with constant references to drug taking: the very title "slammed" being a colloquial term for injecting drugs; the opening scene in which Kieran wanders around miming a stabbing action; the third scene which opens with a colour inverted and ghostly time-warped clip (which is the cover image of this book) of Kieran holding a syringe next to Jon's inner elbow (this only becomes visible if you invert the colours back); and a fourth scene that starts with the ritualistic swallowing of "1.1" – some mysterious liquid to which Jon says "if I pass out just keep fucking me" – a likely reference to the amount of GBL being taken in millilitres; finally, the films blurb claims it to be a "an honest and true record of lawless 21st-century man-sex: real, raw, and straight to the point". Undoubtedly, a somewhat unsubtle pun on the US gay slang term "points" meaning needles. Such language could lead the viewer to think the film is somehow an ethnography of gay sex, something that Liam Cole has broadly claimed (Andrews, 2013), as well as argued for by Dean (2009) with regard to other Treasure Island Movies.

However, were *Slammed* to be ethnographic it would have to make at least some attempts to represent the everyday aspects and organisational structure of chemsex sub-culture, it does not. Instead, *Slammed* is (by Cole's own admission) a planned set of scenes organised several weeks in advance (Andrews, 2013). These are then distilled down from hours of footage into what Paul Morris suggests are "loops of intensity" that "perhaps resonate" with the viewer that so that "the bodies of those watching porn resonate… bridging the sensory gaps… [whilst] rhythms of masturbation help efface such gaps further" (Morris & Paasonen, 2014: pg 231). This is a film produced for gay men and sold to them to masturbate to. It is pornography, not a raw and true documentary or a work of ethnographic film-making – but this does not mean its value is lessened when it comes to helping us understand how the gaps between subjects can be bridged aurally. Therefore, whilst pornography isn't ethnography, this is pornography at its best: a deep dive into sexual cultures where their production, recording, and representation are done in such a way as to reduce

and bridge the distance the viewer may feel from fantasies which seem beyond their quotidian existence. In other words, *Slammed* may be an idealised representation of Chemsex, but it still creates a resonance between viewer and viewed that both finds and multiples those resonances.

*Slammed's* reception, despite engaging with broadly similar content to *Amphetamine* and *Chemsex*, resulted in various attacks on the director Liam Cole. Critics described him as "scum" or "the most disgusting studio porn director in the world" who had created a film that "sexualises drug abuse" (Naulls, 2013). However, the same blog engages in a process identified by Dyer (2003), where moral condemnation produces a close analysis of the sexually taboo acts, revealing them to be simultaneously attractive. For example, Naulls' description of Phelps as being "so unbelievably high that he wants nothing more than to spread his legs and be prolapsed" reads in a similar way to the sexually explicit blurb written by Treasure Island Media to promote their films. *Slammed* flirts with taboo and, as explored further in the next chapter, taboo is a seat of power, one that is both enticing and repellent. The skill of Liam Cole lies in carefully reflecting this energy back onto itself whilst simultaneously drip-feeding it to the viewer. Analysis of this film is inspired by Julian's recounting of the enclosed nature of chemsex spaces which intensify his experiences.

## Carl: This space and that space

Carl is a white gay man in his 50s. Personality-wise he fills the room, his voice comes from the centre of his chest, and it is robust and animated, but not piercing. Books surround the main seat in the house, he is very much a man who loves to read, think, and reflect. He used to work as a religious minister, but when he came out about 25 years ago, he left his job, wife, children, and home. Within a short period of time, he started working in various secular roles supporting people with mental health difficulties and became well integrated into the life of the LGBT+ community in Manchester. Yet, from the outset, it is important to highlight that Carl never speaks about moving from a monogamous straight married life to a promiscuous drug-infused gay one with a sense of unresolved trauma or shame. Instead, he described it in resolutely musical terms by paraphrasing the work of Bill Brewster *Last Night A DJ Saved My Life* who Carl summarised as follows:

> "*from primitive times of music, from the development of music… there was a leader of the Village… who had the capacity to beat the drum, to bring everybody together into the same place. And it's not geographically, he brought them together by the beat of the drum, and the rhythm of the music… [he also provided] herbs, and plants, and medicines, to bring the community together into the same place*".

Carl connected his experience of chemsex with a much longer history of music combined with drugs bringing everyone together into the same space. It was this

merging of the musical and chemical that gave me the first hints that musicality could be an important aspect to chemsex. As Carl continued to talk about his experiences, he expanded on his construction of spaces, juxtaposing "*this space*" with "*that space*". "This space" was the one that was nearer to him, and it was the space that he inhabited when he was in a heterosexual marriage and that he still feels he lives in when sober. It is the space of The Church where there were "*more rules of what you didn't do, than what you did do*"; it is sclerotic because of the number of taboos that striate it.

Both these spaces (this space and that space) are physical and social, and their qualities can be analysed by finding their resonances with Sonbert's *Amphetamine* which employs music to offer a particularly askance view on heteropatriarchal society. As Gartenberg (2020) notes, Sonbert opens *Amphetamine* with a close-up of a formal portrait of a late 19th-century woman. This is a direct reference to the portrait of Carlotta in Hitchcock's (1958) film *Vertigo* where Madeline stares at in a gallery in the museum scene. In *Vertigo*, this scene is emblematic of the constant, close, and paranoid male gaze adopted by Jonny, who tries (and fails) to capture and control the main female character Madeline (White, 1991). The music that accompanies this scene in *Vertigo* consists of chromatic descending loops that reflect the anxiety and looping paranoia of this mode of knowing. Yet, there is a juxtaposition between the visual reference to *Vertigo* in *Amphetamine* and the concurrent musical accompaniment of The Supreme's track *Where Did Our Love Go. WDOLG* also works with a chromaticism, except it lacks the same paranoid looping. Instead, through Diana Ross's vocal delivery, an altogether different mood is achieved by swelling into phrases that then drop chromatically whilst simultaneously being let go of with an air of dejection. The referencing of the heteropatriarchal fantasy of male power when juxtaposed against these very different soundtracks suggests an alternative perspective on heteropatriarchal culture. Namely, as Ward (2020) notes, one which views it as lamentably tragic and weak, so much so that Ward calls on queer people to become allies to straight people (and straight women in particular) to help them find liberation from it. Alongside the soundtrack, Sonbert slowly pans the camera down and along at a sympathetic pace to the music until we come across two leather boots, a coding for queerness. The camera then pans up these boots to reveal a young man. He slowly stands up, and the camera shots reverse to make it appear as if he has been magically transported to a party with a group of friends sitting around and chatting (see Figure 4.1).

What has been entered into finds resonance with what Carl refers to as "*that space*", or the space he inhabits when he takes drugs. It is into "that space", the one slightly further away, that he entered when he had sex on weed and poppers with his now husband, when the rest of his (heterosexual married life) was taking place in "this space". This was an experience for Carl that "*blew my head off*" and led to him saying he felt "*an incredible sexual experience… of real unity… which I'd never experienced… it's one of those spaces that you get into not because of what I'm getting out of it*". A similar unity can be seen in the film *Amphetamine* in what Suárez (2014) identified as representing a "casual binding ritual" (pg 642)

*Figure 4.1* Sonbert, *Amphetamine* group of people socialising.

between friends. Many of the accoutrements of chemsex are panned over – drugs, needles, cans, and knives – and we then see the ritualised loading of a syringe begin. Our queer subject does not inject this drug though; instead, he hands the syringe over to another man who places a tourniquet around his arm and just as the needle pierces the skin the music track effortlessly segues into The Supremes Track *Baby Love*. The lyrics "baby love, my baby love" ring out with the joy of being in unity with another. There's a bounce to the piano, the bright sounds of trumpets call out beckoning a brighter future. Life and energy are now imbibed into the film, there's even a bounce to the word "baby" in Ross's vocal delivery that contrasts with the previous dejected feelings. There is no unity, but there's a motioning towards it the moment the syringe meets the skin.

Shortly after this, we see another man drawing and injecting drugs, this time the image is slightly blurred, although still identifiable (see Figure 4.2). Then, we are faced with a screen of abstract light and dark, the result of a camera misloading which are in fact shots of Times Square, New York (Gartenberg, 2020), one of the most identifiable queer utopias of the time. Sonbert's inclusion of this material expands the horizon of experiences from a single bedroom to an entire community of dream-like-pleasure-seeking-queers networked via bars and clubs – the boundaries of queer space begin to ripple outwards and a porosity is created across time times and spaces that queers occupy. What is being emphasised therefore is what Carl

*Figure 4.2* Sonbert, *Amphetamine* man drawing up drugs.

refers to as "that space" where boundaries between self and other are thinner, and more malleable to the transformative potential of drugs. Silence and blurred images of Times Square then ensue for a few more moments until a third Supremes song, *I Hear A Symphony*, begins.

The cuts between scenes begin to get quicker and quicker, moving between blurred images of Times Square, men kissing on a mattress, more blur, tender kissing and caressing, blur again. The music reinforces the blissful nature of the experience of sex on drugs: the cheerful melodies repeat one another but not in a paranoid fashion, there's a bounce to the piano, marimbas attack hard, and melt away into sensations of love and warmth. A wistful feeling of fluidic yet tangible connection is formed whilst upward key changes signal a continuing triumphant form of ever-increasing pleasure. This is never directed towards any sense of representing an orgasm, the traditional teleology of sex. Instead, the final scene returns to the man who started it all, who nonchalantly picks up his jacket and walks out the door whilst the music of The Supremes continues to herald the increasing ecstasy.

All of this resonates with Carl's narrative who stresses how gay men and drugs can produce spaces that provide for connections which refuse shame or trauma but instead allow exploration of new potentials for subjectivity. For Carl, this resulted in him being "*more accepting of [my]self*" and of others, and it

helped him "*construct ideas of a more healthy, peaceful, equitable world*". Primarily because drugs and music combined to "*release*" him "*into bigger spaces*" that "*bring people together*". It also gave a freedom to his "*sexual imagination*" allowing him to contemplate ideas when he was high such as threesomes. These ideas would then "*spring back*" when he was sober and could act on bringing them about. For Carl therefore, "*that space*", was the one of chemsex which he entered temporarily bringing back certain qualities into "*this space*" to help transform everyday life.

## Ryan: From consonance to dissonance

Music is not however limited to representing experiences of sex and drugs. The resonances can go deeper and can serve to enhance sexual response (Taylor, 2012, 2018). Ryan provided a particularly clear example of this. He was in his late 40s at the time of the study, and like Carl, he too had children but had long since separated from their mother. He worked in a pharmaceutical laboratory. During the course of our interviews, he entered into a new relationship, and by the fourth interview was mostly sober, only doing drugs that coincided with clubbing a few times a year rather than doing chemsex every few weeks. When we first met, he had been doing chemsex for many years and was relatively enthusiastic about it saying that he *"loved that feeling of being in a different headspace of perceiving the world slightly differently. It's like having a psychological holiday"*. In one of his early experiences of chemsex, Ryan described how he went round to someone's flat for a hook-up which was accompanied by "*funky, horny, uplifting, dirty beats… to accompany the floaty giddy rampant state we both [were] in*". What ensued was an enhancement of sexual play in which the "*galaxy suddenly [felt like] a sparklier place for both of us*". The resonances between music, sex and drugs mutually intensified one another in a consonant way.

Yet, these intensifications were unstable, and over the course of two years, his relationship to chemsex became increasingly dissonant; he began to question his relationship to chemsex. At first, scepticism crept in about the chemsex party scene where Ryan noted that "*fucked up crazy people*" were damaging to his mental health, leading him to experience paranoia. He therefore resolved to engage in more planned and one-on-one hook-ups. By the third interview (about 18 months after we first met), several more bad experiences led Ryan to say he had to "*demonise chemsex… turn it into the enemy*" in order to "*escape it*". Importantly, just as chemsex can resonate with pleasure it can resonate with fear. These qualities can be witnessed in *Chemsex*, but the film's representation of chemsex dampens down the richness of study participants' experiences by loudly demanding everything resonate to a singular sense of fear.

In the opening scenes of *Chemsex,* the audience encounters a short series of interviews. Underpinning these is a looping set of chords and beats that draw their timbre and style from electronic dance music. Yet, the mood of the music works

against any sense of joy that is usually associated with dance music. Instead, unstable chord positions and mournful progressions bring a sense of loss and fear. After a few moments of the music setting the scene emotionally, a voice over begins: "I'm worried… they just look possessed… desperate… I'm scared of this perversion of the gay scene… its pathological there's something scary happening". The music persists, amplifying and carrying these emotions with it, and the film cuts to views of the London gay scene, which (despite its weaknesses in relation to various intersecting prejudices relating to class, race, gender, and age) is still considered a place where a sense of community and a modicum of happiness can be found. Yet, in *Chemsex,* the music dampens down any such interpretation and instead draws the streets and dance floors into compelling resonance with the anxious and worrisome interviews – by so doing, it sits on counterpoint to Sonbert's *Amphetamine* which drew out the resonances between joyful chemsex and the budding New York gay scene. *Chemsex,* which could have been a film displaying reasonable concern about drug dependency in the gay community, instead demands that everything resonates to the same monolithic frequency of fear. This is established right from the opening scene of *Chemsex* where the music flips established genre conventions. Typically, in dance music, the drop further unites a (largely) MDMA-infused crowd in ecstatic joy. However, Chemsex offers a darker version of the drop. After cuts between interviews and the London gay scene, the music changes to slow, repeating chords with a growing clattering noise. As one man narrates his drug use, the noise intensifies, leading to scenes of an anxious dance floor and red-tinged sex parties. The rhythmic clatter builds to an orgasmic cry, but instead of a joyful drop, it crashes into a dark, descending synth. The music draws the viewer into a relentless teleological narrative which pervades the film: it insists chemsex is a dark and fearful practice, especially at the peak of its pleasures.

To be clear, I am not trying to argue that representing chemsex as at times less than emotionally fulfilling is wrong. Ryan certainly engaged in this practice, and fear served as a potent psychological mechanism to protect himself from harm. However, *Chemsex* does more than that. By narrating the practices of chemsex to a fear-inflected soundtrack, the film engages with what Kagan has parallels with the re-crisising of HIV and AIDS which involves the "dredging up, reworking and redistributing" previous "heightened feelings and spectacular images" (Kagan, 2018: pg 131) by presenting chemsexers as pitiful "object lesson[s] to the spectator" (Kagan, 2018: pg 129). The ensuing moral superiority that comes with this re-crisising then brings the moral imperative to save people "before more are lost" (European Chemsex Forum, 2018: pg 8). Some efforts to amplify the fears of chemsex have most clearly been voiced by former AIDS activists who, having more recently turned their attention to chemsex, drawing direct inspiration from ACTUP slogans such as "silence equals death" (Fierstein et al., 2006: pg 15) to insist that talking is the only way to stop people dying. The process of transferring feelings from the HIV/AIDS crisis to chemsex reverberates through history and musical representations, amplifying fear within queer culture and presenting a

monolithic understanding of the chemsexing subject while silencing the complexity experienced by individuals like Ryan.

The explorations of chemsex detailed above both relied on applying some sort of non-diegetic[1] music to draw out the different resonances of chemsex, what has persisted therefore in both of them is some sort of external relation. In my exploration of the resonances between *Amphetamine* and Carl, this relationship drew attention to the contrasting spaces of heteronormativity and what might be described as queer utopia. For Ryan, chemsex became helpfully controlled by fear and became a useful psychological mechanism to protect himself from harm. However, this fear has been amplified by cultural texts such as *Chemsex* that re-crisis the heightened emotions and imagery of the HIV/AIDS and the homophobia that preceded it, ultimately simplifying and silencing the complex realities of people who do chemsex. I turn now to explore what it might mean to explore chemsex as being in a musical relationship with itself, searching for the complex resonances between the bodies of men that become intensified in the tightly enclosed spaces of the chemsex party. To do this, I move onto Julian's experience of chemsex and how it informs a reading of *Slammed.*

## Julian: Chemsex as *ars erotica*

Julian was 40 when we met, white, proudly working class, and socially liberal in his political views. He came from the South East of England but had lived in Manchester for 15 years. He spent a lot of his time reading and studying, and enjoyed new and fringe theatre productions. He had also just started studying for an undergraduate social sciences degree. All of this informed the perspectives he took on economic and social issues. He also devoted time to volunteering to help tackle the issues he saw in society. Over the course of two years he never expressed any interest in establishing a longer-term romantic relationship, although he has a few fuck-buddies some of whom he does chemsex with. It is during his reflections about these hook-ups that he discussed the spaces of chemsex as "*our own little boys club*" in which nothing seems to exist apart from the bodies and pleasures of men. Even time becomes somewhat meaningless and looses its regulatory effect. He noted that in a chemsex party you do not "*have to deal with what time represents*"; instead, one has "*drug time*" in a room full of strangers with clothes off where a "*parallel universe*" exists. Yet, it is not (just) the drugs that produce this sensation; instead, it is the "*walled around*" privacy of the home where curtains are drawn, there are few (or no) sounds outside in the dark of the night, and all forms of communication with the outside world (save for hook-up apps) are severed. The film *Slammed* represents this parallel universe of chemsex, and as I will demonstrate through a musicological analysis, helps us understand the tightly contained space of chemsex as a resonating chamber that brings chemsex into relation with itself. Before this though a few further notes on how music is constructed and analysed are relevant.

## Analysing the (non)musical

*Slammed* is devoid of any non-diegetic music. However, this need not pose a significant problem, as Jarman-Ivens (2011: pg 9) argues "analysing just the notes [in music] is a difficult (and possibly not very useful task)" in relation to queer experiences because it often fails to take account what is queerest of all about music: namely, how it moves us in erotic ways. As Taylor (2012) noted earlier, music can at times be so erotic it can be considered sex, but the reverse too needs to be considered: namely, might sex be considered music. In order to progress this thesis, I take inspiration from Jarman-Ivens' (2011) analysis of the queerness of voice. She argues that instead of focusing musicological analysis on notes, the analysis should instead focus on what Barthes called *the grain* which extends the analysis to focus on elements such as "the air in a whisper, or [the] movement of lips, tongue, and teeth against each other" (Jarman-Ivens, 2011: pg 5). All of these elements constitute for Jarman-Ivens (2011: pg 21) the "under-assimilated" in musicological analysis because there is no "established culture in the analysis of music of wanting to identify them". Most importantly, Jarmen-Ivens argues that the *grain* of the voice (unlike other instruments) carries with it the productive qualities of the body: it is the embodied nature of music, but it is also "inviting and seductive" (Jarman-Ivens, 2011: pg 17), not least because it proceeds from one body to penetrate others, linking them together. All of this points towards moving away from an analysis of notes and chord progressions (which are well engaged with in Classical musicology) towards a focus on the under-assimilated shared intensities distributed between bodies via the voice.

In what follows, I extend the attention paid to voice to the other sounds the body makes in sex. In a dialogue between Morris and Paasonen (2014), Paasonen argues these can be best understood as a repetitive "sonorous envelope" (akin to dance music) formed from repetitive "grunts, heavy breathing, and bodies slamming" (Morris & Paasonen, 2014: pg 235). Whatever the source or resonance, Morris insists that "when resonance is sensed it must be explored" (Morris & Paasonen, 2014: pg 233). I propose doing so with a similar set of tools to those used in the musicological analysis developed by Jarmen-Ivens, so as to develop a different perspective on chemsex.

## Slammed

Potential resonances emerging between bodies and pornography can be traced throughout *Slammed*, and many of these occur through aural means. One of the clearest examples of resonance occurs early in the fourth (and final) scene (at around 2h56m) and demonstrates how bodies can become aurally and unintentionally enmeshed. It also foreshadows a much longer and deeper resonance across temporal, digital, and visceral mediums towards the end of the film. Earlier in the

*Figure 4.3* Cole, *Slammed* group orgy.

film, at least Jon and Kieran have taken what is intimated to be GBL. Jon is riding *Another Unnamed Top* (AUT) on the sofa thrusting his hips rhythmically backwards and forwards, whilst AUT plays with Jon's nipples. Jon he is facing away from and perpendicular to Kieran, who is lying on his back being fucked by Simon (see Figure 4.3). Neither couple is looking at the other.

As Simon is fucking Kieran, Simon's lips kiss and depart from Kieran's neck with a gentle wet sound, only to be reflected back into the sound of Simon spitting on Kieran's face. The bodies move in and out to these sounds, Simon pulling Kieran's body in, pushing his cock deeper, only for Kieran to cry out "ahhh fuck", his body writhing up and then back down in time with his moans. The sounds of bodies pleasuring, penetrating, pulling in and out of another, always connecting, building into an aurally mediated crescendo of one another's bodies: the pleasure of penetration becomes aural as well as visceral. Yet, the sounds of the bodies (unlike the cocks fucking the asses) penetrate more than one body. The wet, sweaty, spitted sounds and moans emanate out of, and penetrate, the bodies of Jon and AUT. AUT, feeling this intensification makes the unconscious conscious and utters to Jon, "harder". Going deeper into the pursuit of resonance Simon, moving from grasping Kieran closely moves into a plank position over Kieran, fucking rhythmically Kieran's upwards-facing ass, they are both deep within each other's gaze and kiss. As Simon begins to thrust in and out, a rhythmical squelching noise begins, after three beats of this Jon noticeably speeds up his hips riding AUT's dick to be in rhythm to Kieran's wet ass. The beat of the Simon-Kieran-Jon-AUT fucking takes on a musical trance-like quality and all four bodies find a sympathetic resonance that translates their bodily sounds into externalised moans of pleasure which are then internalised again so as to inform the responses of their bodies.

Echoing closely what Suárez (2014) says in reference to Sonbert's *Amphetamine* regarding sex of sex on drugs we witness a "deeper immersion into [the] rhythms, sounds, and striations" (pg 10). Circuits form between the aurally penetrated bodies bringing them into a resonance with one another, loosening the boundaries between them. The effects are not cerebral, they are aural-visceral.

Just before the film ends, resonance between bodies becomes sustained for longer and it extends to the playing of a pornographic film. Unlike the previous scene, this final scene was not quite filmed in one take; there are a few cuts where the positioning of the bodies moves slightly. However, the audio transitions appear seamless and give the impression of continuity smoothing over any visual anomalies. At this point in the film, Jon is now the only one bottoming, with Kieran having resumed his topping role from earlier in the film. The camera centres mostly (but not exclusively) on Jon who is on his back with legs in the air with Kieran and more latterly AUT fucking his ass. Porn is playing on a laptop that is placed on the floor about a metre away from Jon, its sounds can be heard in the background but none of the participants in the scene appear to be looking at it, and momentarily, the camera pans to and from the laptop (see Figure 4.4) to emphasise the circuits of pleasure that are beginning to form.

As the scene progresses, the sounds made by bodies and the sounds from the porn begin to bounce off one another. Kieran's dick moves in and out of Jon's ass to the sounds of sliding flesh accompanied by rhythmical moans, cries, and little whimpers from Jon. A synchronicity starts to build between these sounds and those of the porn playing in the background. Much as the bodies of men watching gay porn find a synchronicity and pleasure when masturbating to porn, the bodies of the actors find energy and sympathy from externalising and internalising these sounds in a philharmonic circuit of sexual pleasure. As Kieran comes to an end of fucking

*Figure 4.4* Cole, *Slammed* laptop and bodies.

Jon, everything starts to resonate in time and sympathy. Not only have the bodies of the four men begun to beat as one, but they have also begun to resonate with the queer archive of pleasure that is gay porn.

With the bodies now synced up with each other and an archive of pleasure, Kieran with his thumb on Jon's hole says, "your hole's opening up". The constant interchanging of sound, both present and past, and the bringing together of bodies into an ever-increasingly coherent call and response, leads to the boundaries of the body loosening and becoming more porous. They do this at the same time as the tightly contained boundaries of the chemsex party become a resonating chamber that they are penetrated by, and become part of. Remaining in a single room the musicality of sex emerges, bodies resonate amplifying the pleasures until eventually they reach their peak. No longer is chemsex an object of analysis caught within a psychopathologising gaze, nor is it trapped in a struggle with dominant cultures of neoliberalisation or homonormativity. Instead, chemsex has become a chamber, where bodily boundaries are penetrated to produce resonance, which is then expressed and intensified through the archive of porn that penetrates the actors, and subsequently the masturbating viewer, within whom the loops of intensity linger on.

## (Chem)sex is music

As is commonly acknowledged, music can be highly emotive (Juslin & Sloboda, 2001). Queer approaches to musicology have argued that this thesis can be extended to the sexual (Taylor, 2009, 2012, 2018) with attention being paid to the voice by Jarman-Ivens (2011). For Jarman-Ivens, the voice is "inviting and seductive, as powerful and awesome as something with a particular potential to call its listener into a peculiar intense relationship" (pg 17). There is a clear erotic charge to the voice when it proceeds from one body and penetrates others to be heard. In doing so, she argues it "takes part of the body with it". Something that was within one body is now shared between two (or more). The bodily sensations evoked and provoked during chemsex follow this pattern. The vocal utterances that proceed from one body take their erotic charge and penetrate the bodies of others within the group. The constant flows of sounds between the bodies build up into something that becomes more organised. Bodily boundaries, through their constant penetration open up, what was internalised becomes externalised and amplified, resonance is built at least in part because boundaries are transgressed.

Seen this way, chemsex is no longer an internalised and pathological struggle with homosexuality; one which must be addressed by external supposedly healing forces of a dominant culture that aims to normalise and isolate the chemsexing subject. It is no longer a set of practices driven by unconscious fear-laden motivations whereby one becomes isolated from others by continually failed attempts at using drugs to escape trauma. Fear may of course remain one of the ways in which chemsex is experienced, though as explored in the next chapter fear is often more about creating boundaries than finding resonances. Instead, when chemsex is

examined in relation to itself through careful and close attention to its resonances, we are transported to "*that place*", a resonating chamber for the voices and bodies of gay men: (chem)sex becomes music. Once its resonances are appreciated, it may become possible to start examining the value and effects the porosity chemsex creates between bodies.

## Note

1 Non-diegetic music is not part of the story world and is not heard by the characters; it is intended only for the audience; diegetic music in contrast is part of the story world and can be heard by the characters within that world.

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Chapter 5

# Fear to pleasure

## Mandated fear and monsters

"What is chemsex? And how worried should we be?" was the headline to Barbara Speed's (2016) piece for the left leaning *New Statesman* magazine. The questions asked imply that there can be no neutral or joyous stance on chemsex. Instead, we must always combine any thinking about chemsex with a sense of worry and moderate our feelings of anxiety upwards according to the (partial) facts that are drawn to our attention. The first facts Speed presents in her article are those surrounding the case of Henry Hendon. Hendron, a former English barrister, was involved in a case where his boyfriend, Miguel Jimenez, died from a drug overdose in 2015. Hendron had supplied the drugs, leading to his guilty plea for possession with intent to supply in 2016. He was sentenced to 14 months imprisonment and disbarred (prevented from working as a barrister). Hendron's case resonates with the core fear of moral panics about drug use with its capacity to kill and cause hardship to all involved. Speed then moves on to describe everything about chemsex in terms of excess: the drugs used are "over-stimulating", and the temporal boundaries of sex are breached where people "stay awake for days at a time" at parties where people arrive at "three in the morning": the normalities of life associated with the white middle classes are worryingly threatened. Furthermore, an excessive amount of time is spent on chemsex because despite the energy and stimulation, people "find it difficult to orgasm". The almighty arbiter of the sexual script, the male orgasm, is worryingly absent. Pleasure thereby becomes uncontained, being spread across immorally decadent amounts of time, space, and bodies, far exceeding the sexual scripts that seek to contain it within acceptable boundaries. The worry expressed in the article can be read as not just something for gay men to be concerned about, but the challenge the chemsexing gay man presents to the boundaries that are conventionally placed around sexuality. The reader is left to remain with an uncomfortably unanswered question about just how worried we should be, leaving them free to ruminate on rather resolve their fear.

Freud (1919) notes that when fears go unanswered in this way they often become constructed as monsters. This can be seen in popular writings on chemsex,

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such as Wharton's (2017) *Something for the Weekend* in which he creates a metaphorically dark world where chemsex grabs at him with claws. Such monsters are psychoanalytically speaking projections of our innermost fears, created to warn us about something (Skal, 2012) appearing at the boundaries of how we understand the self and other demarcating "what kinds of lives, be they human or non-human, are deemed liveable or unliveable" (Hellstrand et al., 2018: pg 146). Furthermore, not only does monstrosity create boundaries between the self and other, but it disciplines our actions, requiring ever-increasing vigilance to create and monitor them (Hellstrand et al., 2018). What emerges in this psychosocial process is an unanswerable fear, one that coalesces into monsters requiring intensive labour to both create and push them to increasingly safe distances. Whilst not all contemporary and popular accounts of chemsex place their monsters so clearly on display, most engage in this type of boundary making activity. Chemsex is always positioned at an analytically safe distance between the coherence of the self and the chemsexing other.

One of the most insightful pieces that avoids this type of writing has been offered by Hickson (2018: pg 2) who notes "chemsex [is] more often used to talk about other people (or our own past) than to talk about our (current) selves", thus highlighting the confused nature of the problem of displacement regarding chemsex: it is never happening now, to us, it is always happening to "them" in times and places which need to be distanced from. Hickson also draws attention to the need to understand the boundaries between those who study chemsex and those who engage in it as not so secure as we care to admit. This is not to say that when talking about chemsex we must always foreground our own experiences, but it is to acknowledge that we need to account for the construction of the boundaries we place between the self and other when producing both the notion of, and studying, chemsex. Hickson's analysis therefore proceeds differently to many other discussions of chemsex. To do this, he borrows the concept of "edgework" from Lyng (2004), to describe the increasing trend in third/late-stage capitalism for people to voluntarily engage in high-risk activities that could lead to potential harm. Hickson is clear that this should not be thought of as a form of self-harm but, following Lyng's logic, as a way for some gay men to explore the pleasures when bodies are pushed to (and sometimes beyond) their limits by engaging in chemsex. Arguing that chemsex is edgework depathologises it and positions it alongside extreme sports in which specialist skills also enable a (safer) exploration of the limits of the human body. For Hickson, the skill of learning how to negotiate the edge is what allows fear to dissipate and other pleasurable sensations and emotions to come to the fore.

Whilst there is much to agree with in Hickson's statements regarding how chemsex sits somewhat unremarkably within a broader sociopolitical context, as well as how we must get close to boundaries in order to analyse them; the idea that one feeling (fear) may dissipate in the service of another (pleasure) when traversing a boundary, risks suggesting that one can objectively identify when a boundary has been crossed. Doing so, brings with it the idea that boundaries

themselves are more tightly defined than may actually be the case, and robs the subject who engages with them of any sense of agency in their (re)construction. In other words, one has either traversed an extant boundary or not, and one has either had one's emotions transformed as a result of this, or not. As Lupton (2013) notes, boundaries are more complex than this and come in many and varied forms. Whilst the ones pertaining to pleasure can be geographic or temporal, boundaries also exist in relation to social categories such as race, political affiliation, class, and gender, all of which come to signify some difference between an imagined 'us' and 'them'. Hickson also sees transgressing boundaries as singularly linked to pleasure. Whilst this may be a common affect, a sense of shame and (temporary or permanent) expulsion from society may also occur where rituals and practices are required of an individual to be readmitted (Freud, 1919). Chemsex rehabilitation programmes (discussed in more detail in Chapter 6) may serve as an example of these rituals and practices. However, Freud also recognised the value in transgressing boundaries, being quite clear that boundaries were usually drawn around "matters which are capable of enjoyment, such as freedom of movement and unrestrained intercourse… it seems as if these prohibitions are necessary because some persons and objects possess a dangerous power" (Freud, 1919: pg 35–36). Furthermore, for Freud alongside this dangerous power was a sublimated fascination and desire, with him wryly suggesting that "what nobody desires" does not need a boundary placing around it, and that therefore every boundary "must conceal a desire" (Freud, 1919: pg 37). Boundaries are therefore not just about containment but are better thought of as cultural concealments pertaining to (at least some) of the more pleasurable ways of making lives more liveable. This produces certain taboo actions, places, and objects.

## Bruno

Bruno's experience offers one of the clearest examples of how the objects of chemsex become charged with the dangerous power that Freud makes reference to. Bruno was 32 when we first met. He was a larger-than-life, flamboyant, and flirtatious man. We only did one (very memorable) interview because after the first one he left Manchester to work in France. He had a long and somewhat complex back story which it worth summarising since it demonstrates how people sometimes maintain a close relationship to the specific objects of chemsex.

Bruno began by telling me about himself in relation to his HIV diagnosis. He had applied to work for a logistics company sub-contracted by the British Army in Iraq. With a heritage in Italy, and a skilled linguist, his job was to manage the multi-national and multi-lingual supply chains. As a sub-contractor, he received a standard army medical before leaving for Iraq during the course of which he was diagnosed with HIV. He left for Iraq having "*no idea what was happening"* to his body but gradually learned more about HIV by chatting to people on Grindr. He spent several years in Iraq but eventually struck up an online friendship with someone in Manchester who after some time invited him

to visit. Bruno eventually moved in with him only to discover that he was seriously dependent on both alcohol and drugs. He struggled to navigate this, noting that "*this was the first time I had come across drugs, I'm from a rural part of Italy, we don't really have them where I'm from*". Eventually, he moved out. Throughout the interview, Bruno never spoke about chemsex as being pleasurable; instead, he used drugs because he found it a reliable way to have company. Bruno was clear he did not take drugs because of his HIV diagnosis. Instead, he suggested it just "*made taking drugs easier, all my life I had been worried about HIV, so once I was positive, I could take drugs without worrying about it*". This lack of prohibition was reflected in his finances. He had savings from his time in Iraq which meant at the time of interview, he did not need to work. In the absence of significant financial boundaries, his drug use slowly increased to the point at which he became worried about it. He confided in an old Italian friend and with their support gradually managed to reduce his use. When we met, he had stopped using drugs for several months. Once he had shared the above details of this background he flirtatiously said, "*I have something to show you in my bedroom*". I followed him. His room was immaculate, everything clearly had its place. He went over to the bed and reached on top of the headboard, picking up a glass pipe about six inches long with a small glass bowl at the end. This was the pipe he had used to smoke crystal meth since his arrival in Manchester. He noted that "*Sometimes I feel like I want to have a smoke, so the pipe is in my home, in my room. I don't have a lighter. I don't have any drugs. I don't have anything. I'm not planning on using it*".

There is a common belief amongst drug and alcohol practitioners that all reminders and triggers should be cleared away in order to help firm up the boundaries to prevent one using again. However, Bruno offered an alternative perspective. He kept just the pipe because "*it reminds me of the era what I was doing it*". This reminder was not entirely prohibitive either. On the contrary, he kept the pipe "*just in case at some point I might want to do it again… [in fact] I'm sure I'm going to do it again, but I'm going to be more careful*". Bruno, with the pipe in hand, with a sense of loneliness behind him, and the possibilities of chemsex ahead, had turned the pipe itself into a taboo object. It was both aversive and allusive. Often when objects become taboo in nature they can become difficult to see clearly, all the energy goes in pushing them away. However, Bruno had achieved something more akin to what Hickson encourages: an examination of the boundaries and assumptions we place between ourselves and chemsex in order to more fully understand the complex sociological and psychological dynamics at play. Bruno, rather than using all his energy to estrange himself from the pipe, kept it close. It is this sort of analysis and understanding of chemsex which is so often lacking in the research on chemsex outlined in Chapters 1 and 2, and which carries with it a heavy prohibitionist ontology to always try and push it away, and the accounts offered by the next two participants demonstrate that attempts to approach chemsex in this way often just resulted in the prohibitive force becoming more, not less pleasurable.

## Jack

The use of fear as a strategy to maintain a boundary between gay men and chemsex is illustrated most clearly by one of the participants, Jack. He can best be described as nonchalantly inquisitive, pansexual man who rejects notions of hegemonic masculinity, often wearing nail polish and maintaining a dress sense that subtly challenges gender norms. Jack was 25 when we first met. He lived with his parents but was looking to move out. He had an administrative job for a large manufacturing company and had not done much (if any) of what some people may refer to as "chemsex". He did however drink alcohol and smoked weed on a semi-regular basis as well as sometimes doing poppers. His commentary on how he engaged with these two drugs illustrates the (re)constructable and culturally contingent boundaries that are placed around chemsex.

Jack was first introduced to weed by his friends in his final year at college when he was 19. Jack spoke about how he was now "*comfortable with [it]… so didn't mind trying it again when it came up later on*". The same process had occurred with alcohol which he had initially used to "*get properly drunk… and then have two day hangovers*", but which over time he had "*learned to pick up the tricks*" that decreased the negative consequences. His socialisation into using alcohol and weed use closely follows Becker's (1963) classic description, with users being guided through the effects of a drug by an experienced user to understand and manage the effects as pleasurable. For Jack, both these drugs were widely used by those in his social circles and were accessible to him without any sense of prohibition. He noted that where he lived in Manchester he could "*knock on every other door on my street and you'd probably be able to find someone that has or knows someone that has weed*".

There were therefore no firm boundaries when it came to him integrating alcohol and marijuana into his sex life. Whilst he noted that alcohol helped reduce the voice that "*says, all right maybe don't do that*" there was generally no sense for Jack that alcohol or weed had a transformative effect on sex for him. Other drugs (at least in the first interview) remained off-limits with boundaries maintained through narratives of fear:

> "*… the one that always sticks in my mind was when I was younger, I don't think it was so much like a gay thing, but there was a girl who had been on a night out and she'd taken an ecstasy tablet. And I think, you know, it was a big one in the papers because I think her parents released the images to show this is what one bad pill can do*"

This is likely a reference to the well-publicised case of Leah Betts an 18-year-old British woman (almost always referred to as "girl" in the press at the time) who in November 1995 on her 18th birthday took an ecstasy tablet and died a few days later from hyponatraemia – a rare but fatal complication that can occur when people drink large volumes of water after taking MDMA. In the light of this story,

Jack suggested that he "*would be that person that would take the dodgy pill, or take some really bad cocaine and black out*" – fear established a firm boundary between himself and any other drugs. Yet despite this, he went on to say "*I'd love to try cocaine, I'd love to try LSD*", at least in part because the "*big red button*"[1] telling him not to enticed him to think about doing so.

What Jack was therefore intimating was precisely what Freud (1919) develops in *Totem and Taboo*: the notion that prohibitions and boundaries paradoxically heighten the desire for the very object that is taboo. For Jack, his fear of some sort of serious and lethal medical complication (as with Leah Betts) had an initially prohibitive effect, but as time passed over the four interviews, he undertook, so did the prohibition. By the third interview, he had found a partner who was open to using drugs in their sex life together and experimented with coke and LSD. Desires do not simply disappear because they are taboo; instead, as Freud argues, they exert pressure on the psyche and often resurface with increased vigour invested in the forbidden object. All of this just made the desire more potent, and once Jack had found a partner and context where fear was lessened, he found the experiences to be extremely pleasurable. Yet, for other participants, pleasure arose because of the frisson that remained around engaging in a prohibited activity such as chemsex. In other words, lessening the fear was not what they desired, nor what motivated them to do chemsex and find it pleasurable.

## Andrew

Andrew, as noted in Chapter 2, was very widely read and had been educated at a prestigious university. Whilst all participants said that the interviews resulted in them reflecting on and developing their perspectives on chemsex, for Andrew his perspectives changed quite radically. He moved from a sense that chemsex contained a frisson of prohibition to a much more conservative stance that chemsex was an irredeemable mess. Yet, despite this change in his views, his first interview remains incredibly insightful about how boundaries function to produce and heighten desire, and how this links to broader aspects of gay culture. Andrew suggested that in the pre-1960s in the UK at least part of the thrill of gay sex was that it was prohibited. For Andrew, chemsex was similarly exciting because of its "*sheer clandestine appeal"*. He suggested therefore that homosexuality and chemsex shared a history of "*the same pursuit of pleasure*", but that this had been "*lost"* for gay men overall "*when things [gay sex] are no longer taboo*".

Such constructions regarding the pleasures some gay men receive from engaging in hitherto taboo sexual practices have been well documented and theorised. Crossley (2002, 2004), for example, offers a lively analysis of how some gay men exhibit a "resistance habitus". She suggests patterns of resistance from previous socio-cultural forces, such as the criminalisation of homosexuality continue to resonate for gay men. She applies this thinking to bareback sex to understand how edicts that stigmatised condomless anal sex during the AIDS crisis had the

paradoxical effect of actually making the taboo practice and/or object enticing to some men. Exploring this logic in relation to chemsex Kagan (2018) notes how fears around bareback sex are themselves often reworkings of homophobic tropes from the antecedent pathologisation of homosexuality. Therefore, rather than providing a productive framework for understanding of sub-cultural practices, Kagan argues that the resistance habitus continues a long history of constructing gay sex as somehow pathological. Such pathological ontologies can be found in Andrew's later interviews where he suggests gay men who do chemsex lack "*maturity and self-esteem* [incapable] *of love or empathy or connection, they're just chasing the next high*". This aside, Andrew concluded that the idea that chemsex's transgressions are pleasurable but ultimately fruitless, leaving one in a trap where one must always return from the place of the sick to accept the lessons of the "*normal life*". Some gay men who engage in chemsex may exhibit elements of addiction. However, linking this to a lack of maturity or the need to learn the lessons of a 'normal' life is problematic. It risks reinforcing outdated psychosexual theories that have framed homosexuality as an arrested development. Such views have historically pathologised homosexuality as a condition requiring treatment to transition from 'sick' to 'normal'. As such, the re-crisis of chemsex, and the fear which comes with it, whilst initially felt as a frisson of pleasure can quickly become an incipient form of aversion therapy where fear is applied to teach gay men proper sexual desires. Yet, as Ward (2020) has highlighted, queer sub-cultures, which were once considered perversions, offer much to teach wider society about sexuality. It is therefore possible for there to be a pedagogical value to chemsex, maybe even when fear remains.

## The pedagogy of chemsex

Similar to Andrew, James the youngest 21-year-old participant who had come to Manchester to study at University (introduced in Chapter 2) found that one of the key pleasures of chemsex was the "*wrongness of it*", and it was the fact that it was "*something you shouldn't do*" that kept "*dragging*" him back to it. Whilst this may at first sound wholly negative, he also ascribed a certain agency to the drugs of chemsex which helped him "*do things that I wanted to do, they made me really not give a damn… which I liked because I like the riskiness*". It is possible, therefore, to read James' narrative as demonstrative of Crossley's resistance habitus making up a key part of his psychosexual make-up and that as such he had inherited a pathological framework for his sexuality. However, applying culturally constructed boundaries, such as those related to bareback sex, to a different phenomenon like chemsex is ontologically flimsy, and risks trapping gay men in endless cycles of re-crisis. Whatever they do with their bodies and pleasures, drugged or sober, they will always be subjected to the same drudgingly repetitive disciplinary forces. Whilst it is certainly true for James that chemsex had become problematic, and that as interviews progressed it was clear that his mental health was extremely poor, as I note elsewhere (Nagington & King, 2022), this was

heavily contingent on a lack of timely and appropriate professional support. If, however, one's focus is shifted from the pathological pathway which chemsex is forced along, alternatives begin to emerge. In James' narrative, the boundaries of chemsex can be understood as more than a mere repetition of problematic assumptions about gay men and their sub-cultures. Instead, as argued above in relation to Hickson's work and Bruno's interview, engaging with boundaries may offer pedagogical possibilities that are more liberatory which James intimated towards this saying he had "*managed to do certain things sober*". The criss-crossing of boundaries, particularly those suffused with fear, brings with it not just a frisson, but transformative possibilities.

A clearer understanding of how the pedagogical aspects of chemsex function is given in the film *Chemsex* during a short scene in which Max Spike's photographic work on chemsex is explored. Spike is a kink photographer whose staged images of chemsex carry with them an erotic charge. The charge present in Spike's work derives from him asking participants to "look pained" and for their gazes to be directed towards the most taboo of objects in chemsex: the syringe. Whilst he claims that it is "not his fault" if chemsex looks sexy, his portrayal of the paradoxically aversive and alluring nature of chemsex is compellingly lucid in the photographs. The viewer is presented with a montage of Spike's photographs over which Spike narrates chemsex can:

> "open up receptors or areas of your mind or imagination using drugs. I mean there's stuff that I did because I was on drugs that I was able to do later sober because I [had first] learned how to do it whilst on drugs"

At this point, the montage of images ends and the viewer is returned to a shot of Spike saying to camera, with a wry smile and a raising of the eyebrows, "you know what I mean?". After having seen the montage and being faced with this question, the viewer is forced to feel addressed as either an insider or an outsider: do we, those who Spike is addressing, know about the ability for chemsex to educate?

Yet, this conversation was occurring as part of a photoshoot, in which other gay men who do chemsex are working with Spike to represent it. The question does not therefore emerge as one that was addressed only to the film's audience, but was also to the gay men in the room, one of whom responds, off camera, with an almost imperceptible but enthusiastic "yes", so quiet it is only really present if you were listening for it. This out-of-bounds affirmation of the pedagogy of chemsex serves to remind us that "*wrongness*" which James speaks about must be spoken about in hushed terms, at all times covered by the pretence of horror. Fear therefore is not something which can nor should limit our experiences. Instead, it may be best thought of as demarcating those boundaries which contain a transformative power. This may be felt as a subversive bodily pleasure, but it may also be something that helps transform the self and the boundaries that construct subjectivity.

## The queerness of boundaries

What the above affirms is the queerness of boundaries. They do not (as Freud imagines) have a civilising function, outside of which there exist amorphous, abjected, and agentic subjects. Instead, beyond the boundaries of existence a cohesiveness exists – one where pleasures and lessons abound. However, outsider status as hitherto described brings with it the moral obligation to use one's freedom responsibly to be granted return passage to the fold. The taboo chemsexer must always be willing to participate in the rituals which will cleanse him of his taboo experiences. They may be permitted to bring back lessons with them, but they must renounce the teacher and be discreet about the lessons learned. Under the reassuring mask of confidentiality provided through a research project such as this one, many of the participants spoke with myself about these lessons: such as how chemsex made them reflect on their psychological make-up (discussed in Chapter 3) community and connection (discussed in Chapter 4) or capitalism (discussed in detail in Chapter 6); it was exceedingly rare for them to talk with anyone else about how chemsex taught them valuable lessons, positive or negative.

This points to one of the core problems around conceptualisations of chemsex: it exists in a resistive tension with sober straight sex, where the direction of the elastic recoil is never towards chemsex. One must always return to sober, hetero (or homo) normative sex, and perform in ways that demonstrate one's compliance with this set of practices. To this end, it is tempting to follow Baxter (an astute artist and autoethnographer of chemsex sub-culture) into his severed world of a chemsex party:

> "*a scene our little chemical republic, our cum-driven utopian state. We were artists and escorts, porn stars and sexual health professionals, historians, logistics drivers, one of us owned a tailoring concern in Deansgate's salubrious environs. Aged 20 to 55, slim to well-built, some beer bellies and some six packs, big cocks, small cocks, bubble butts, and one set of absolutely luscious lips. We were all of differing sero-status (Poz, Neg, UnDetectables and PrEP babies) ever so casual revealed. Black African, Cuban British, South Asian, Polish, French, Irish and a few locals floating about – the United Nations of Chemsex, you could say*"
>
> (Baxter, 2020)

In this conceptualisation, Baxter views chemsex as a utopian space with its own self-sustaining world of pleasure, isolated, and free, consciously revelling in the expansive boundaries being transgressed. As joyous as this description may be, Baxter undoes the potential for it to become a grand narrative of chemsex by saying his account is "a chemsex story, not the chemsex story" (Baxter, 2020). The boundaries that enclosed his chemsex utopian state from the rest of the world were temporary. Eventually therefore, no matter how much we may write against it we inevitably have to return to engage with those people and boundaries which we

may have no volition to engage with. This is the nature of how power, subjectivity, and society work – we are drawn into relationships that shape the self despite any will to do so otherwise, and which may create uncomfortable power dynamics and conflicts of values (Butler, 2015). There is however a possibility to play with these conflicts, exploiting them, a process the next participant revelled in.

## Ray

Ray was one of the first people I interviewed. For reasons that were never clear, despite his enthusiastic and exuberant conversational style, we never met again for an interview. However, through informal contact I am aware that he remains broadly happy and healthy. Ray was 48 when we met up. He comes from a white working-class background in the North of England. At the start of the interview, he recounted how he had been a prolific party animal in the 1990s enjoying the myriad affordances present in the clubs and drugs of Manchester at the time. He lamented that nowadays when people partied, the enjoyment derived from the drugs being used for sex rather than the shared experience of clubbing. Despite his disappointment, Ray maintained an active involvement in the chemsex scene that involved him in keeping a stock of injecting equipment. He was able to narrate in detail what each item was used for. He also had a Twitter profile that anonymously documented his sex life, which he claimed was sober, despite all the paraphernalia and knowledge that he possessed. Such apparent contradictions would come to form the hallmark of his interview. He said that he kept all the equipment for his sexual companions, most of whom preferred sex on drugs. He admitted he got an erotic thrill from seeing people "*slamming [injecting] together, where everyone, loses their inhibitions*". His sobriety, his documentary practices, and his scopophilia led to him to be an astute commentator on chemsex sub-culture.

At the start of the interview, Ray invested considerable time and energy describing chemsex as a "*horrifying mess [that] people get into*", which was "*destroying people's lives*" and "*wrecking their bodies*". After various other fear- and destruction-infused metaphors, he concluded that "*there's nothing positive that comes out of it*". He finished the first twenty minutes of our two-and-a-half-hour interview with the statement: "*I hope that's the sort of thing you wanted*". A firm boundary had therefore been placed around chemsex, one that highlighted its fearful and destructive qualities. However, this boundary gave way in the second part of the interview, when it became apparent that this narration of chemsex was not constructed to push people away from chemsex and its qualities. Instead, when pushed to describe what chemsex was like, Ray continued the interview in more jovial even pleasurable metaphors saying, "*people just want fucking, you could stick [a large wooden trunk] up somebody's arse when they're on M-Cat [mephadrone] and they'd love it… they'd come back for more… the sex is great*".

A more porous and iterative relationship between the monstrous and the pleasurable therefore began to emerge. Ray's account differs from that of Jack where the taboo on chemsex operated via the fear of medical complications. This created

a boundary which he would not cross until the risks were mitigated through finding a partner to do drugs with that he trusted. It also differed from that of Andrew, for whom fear had been sublimated into feelings of enhanced pleasure (at least at the first interview) which also created a boundary, but one which was recognisable because he had crossed it and felt a compelling need to return to the right (sober) side the boundary. It also differed from James who's crossing of the boundary resulted in him returning having learned something, and reinforcing the position of the boundary through further constructing chemsex as 'wrong'. All of them had little to no agency in the creation of the boundary itself. Ray offered a different account of how boundaries are engaged with. Within it, there was no hint of Crossley's unconscious resistance, he was consciously constructing the boundary, imbibing it with a sense of fantastical fear, playing into and energising many of the fears already associated with chemsex. He did this, not because he believed in them but because doing so produced a productive "spiral of pleasure and power" (Foucault, 1990: pg 45). What begins to emerge therefore is what MacCormack (2012) has referred to as the queer ethics of monstrosity, where "flows of affectivity" (pg 256) circulate and grow. Whilst tension was released for both Jack, Andrew and James by deciding which side of a boundary to be on, Ray made no such choice to release the tension. He invested in both sides simultaneously, refusing to let the tension draw him towards the charmed circle of homonormativity. Ray did not attempt to shroud the pleasures of chemsex within a horror aesthetic akin to how Matt Spike's interview represented it, with only out-of-frame whispers of its pleasure. Instead, Ray approached something closer to the embodiment of Paul Morris' ontology: "porn as a genre is the antithesis of horror, in that the latter teaches that fear is always justified, porn teaches that fear is only useful if it is fun" (Lupi, 2015). For Ray, any construction of a boundary via fear had to result in pleasure for him, but never in such a way that the tension is resolved on one side or the other. Instead, a constant flow of emerged, the power of the taboo was invested in, with him maintaining a high degree of agency it, enhancing both fear and pleasure.

In summary thus far, chemsex has taught us lessons about boundaries. Firstly, they can be projected onto objects which we keep close to ourselves to remind us of the socio-cultural boundaries we remain attached to. Secondly, despite their solidity in objects, boundaries are also reconstructable and culturally contingent. As such, whether people have or have not engaged deeply with the cultural representations of chemsex, they are always and already interacting with, and redrawing, these boundaries. Thirdly, boundaries can operate as a culturally mediated form of aversion therapy that teaches us to avoid non-normative pleasures such as chemsex. Fourthly, there is often a strong elastic recoil which is always biased towards drawing people back to sober sex, rather than chemsex. Finally, however, there remain ways to subvert the subjection of the self to extant boundaries, and the elastic recoil to normativity. One can maintain an ongoing tension by investing energy in the taboo nature chemsex, whilst simultaneously channelling this tension into strengthening the pleasures of it.

## On the breaching of boundaries

Constructing, investing in, and breaking taboos bring with it the release of power in ways that are intimately linked to the experience of pleasure. However, this tells us little about the morality of chemsex. Not all acts which are taboo and are subsequently broken can be considered mutually pleasurable. There have been many examples of men sexually assaulting other men during chemsex. One can point to specific cases such as that of Stephen Port in London who raped and murdered four men by overdosing them on G, and then attempted to cover up his crimes by faking suicide notes (Daly, 2016). One could also point to Reynhard Sinaga in Manchester who systematically picked up hundreds of vulnerable men, poisoned them using G, and recorded himself sexually assaulting them whilst they were unconscious (Abitt, 2020). Other examples exist which replay racialised taboos. For example, Hussen et al. (2021) in their study of Black gay men's chemsex in Atlanta found that in some cases, Black gay men's drug use was rooted in White gay men's objectification and exploitation of Black men. Similarly, Rice's (2017) documentary *parTyboi: Black Diamonds in Ice Castles* highlights how racism in the USA continues to structure sexual pleasures in abusive ways whereby White men treat Black men as disposable commodities in their sexual fantasies. Whilst above Baxter notes that chemsex can be a scene of radical equalisation in terms of class and race, Hussen and Rice remind us that it can also be a socio-cultural phenomenon where prejudices and structural inequalities can be repeated and even aggravated.

What all these examples point towards are issues that can be better characterised as boundary violations rather than transgressions. As I have highlighted elsewhere (Nagington, 2023) transgressions are not morally problematic. On the contrary, transgressions of boundaries can be vital in resisting some of the more egregious effects of power, but require all involved to maintain agency over the construction and reconstruction of boundaries (Mumford et al., 2019; Nagington et al., 2021). In other words, transgressions of boundaries allow relationships to flourish in new ways to explore the intermingling of the self and the Other, which Fox (2000) characterises as having a gift-like quality. In such dynamics, agency is expressed of both giving and receiving. And as argued in relation to the transgression of bodily boundaries in Chapter 4, when boundaries are transgressed one can be left with an intangibly valuable piece of the other. A boundary violation on the other hand carries a sense of closing down possibilities for new experiences to emerge by engaging in a process whereby a self is invaded by and controlled by the other.

Chemsex teaches us there is a value in recognising forms of transgression that bring us closer to one another. It teaches us that investing increasing amounts of energy into pushing people and objects away, does not make use safer; it makes it harder to understand, work with, and feel the connections that always and already exist. Chemsex teaches us that it is productive to gain agency over, invest in, and transgress the boundaries which we may encounter, and that when we do pleasure begins to draw us closer, rather than fear pushing us apart.

## Note

1 A likely reference Walter Mischel's experiment where children are placed in a room with a big red button and are instructed not to press it while the researcher leaves the room. The researcher then observes the child's behaviour through a hidden camera to see if they resist the temptation to press the button. In almost all iterations of this study, the majority of children press the button.

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Chapter 6

# Capitalism and destruction

## Good gays and bad gays

> "*I would like to be able to go out a lot more, that I don't feel that I have, I'm conscious enough of doing it because I've lost a lot of weight as well, and things like that. So yeah, it rips a part of you away, I think, as well…. it [chemsex] just goes on and on, and on and on, and on, and you just find yourself then there's a sudden stop, everybody's gone their own ways and you're left. And that's when the mind starts working, it's the demons come out or whatever you want to call them; and you pick up pieces, or you're trying to pick up the pieces, from there*."

In the above, Seamus (introduced in Chapter 2) speaking about his experiences of chemsex highlights its destructiveness across a range of registers. In relation to the physical, it has the potential to whittle away his body, ripping parts of it away. Psychologically, demonic forces can be unleashed, a potent metaphor for a certain chaotic quality can be read into the nature of the destruction. All of this then filters into a degradation of the social, leaving him alone to pick up the pieces of himself that chemsex has destroyed. However, his account also highlights how the destructiveness of chemsex can be read (at least in part) as socially contingent. How he feels suddenly isolated with no social support is not an unavoidable feature of chemsex. Instead, it is one that derives from the social structures that shape chemsex for some people. The clandestine nature of the practice, as examined in the previous chapter, brings with it a frisson of pleasure, but it also plays into the isolation that Seamus feels when he is left on his own. Experiences of the destructive potentials of chemsex can therefore all too easily be read as following a specific physical, psychological, and social negative spiral that leaves the destructive force of chemsex to be experienced as directed towards the subject who engages in chemsex. However, alternative pathways exist. In the following example, Andrew describes how the destructiveness of chemsex rather than being

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directed towards the subject can be extended to broader social narratives such as wealth and social status:

> "*the destructive power of it [chemsex] I don't mean, kind of, literally destructive in terms of, like, you know, actually people dying from it. I mean that some of these are no longer a manager or a professor or… they're no longer the most… the best flute player or something. People's social statuses and the things that define people just go away. When you're high, when you feel great, you don't feel high and great because you've accomplished something, because you've made this much money and you've got that job. And when you orgasm, you don't orgasm because you've earned enough money to buy this car to impress somebody. And this entire oppressive nexus of people's behaviours all around me, all the time, all of them marketing, telling me what I'm supposed to wear, where I'm supposed to shop, who I'm supposed to vote for, everything goes away.*"

For Andrew, chemsex contains a similarly destructive power, but he is clear that its destructive potential is not something that is directed towards himself. Instead, he sees the energy being directed at the things which have hitherto prevented him from constructing a coherent sense of self. Wealth, money, social status, and exceptional talent, all those things that so often unwillingly bind people together become irrelevant when Andrew engages in the alternative form of communality found in chemsex. At least in part, this was accompanied by a sense of disconnect from the gay scene in which his educated background meant he felt "*a freak… alienated from everybody around me, certainly on the gay scene*". For Andrew, unlike Seamus, the destructive potential of chemsex also carried a liberatory potential that freed him from the various social expectations placed upon him. As Sontag (1990) notes, anything with destructive potential, such as TB, cancer, or AIDS, is often moralised as a punishment or moral failing, and chemsex similarly forces gay men to navigate this wholly constructed binary: liberation or moral destruction.

Joloy (2023) has further explored this binary in relation to chemsex highlighting how an almost inevitable moralising shapes public narratives, stigmatises individuals engaged in chemsex, and reinforces established norms of gender and sexuality. They suggest that "good gays" and "bad gays" are contrasting labels applied to LGBTQ+ individuals based on their conformity to societal expectations. "Good gays" are those who strive to live their lives in alignment with heteronormative ideals, lauding monogamous relationships and conventional lifestyles. "Bad gays" on the other hand challenge these norms, engaging in behaviours like chemsex that are deemed deviant or transgressive. Together, these labels (used by gay and non-gay people alike) perpetuate stereotypes of gay people as oversexualised, hedonistic, and prone to drug use. They help explain why the dominant response to chemsex has been punitive and moralistic, reflecting the desire to protect established norms of gender and sexuality. Such responses not only reinforce negative perceptions of drug use but also contribute to the marginalisation and stigmatisation of individuals involved in chemsex.

## Pre-emptive strikes

In *Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms,* Melanie Klein (1996) explores how projection and pre-emptive attacks often occur when something we feel connected to is encroached upon. Schizoid personalities attempt to divide experiences and feelings into good and bad parts, the latter of which are projected onto the Other. A sense of destruction of that which an individual holds dear (whether they are directly implicated in the processes of destruction or not) can be projected onto that which they feel encroaches on their sense of self. These feelings can be particularly strong when they occur amongst people who already feel a sense of subjugation or discrimination.

In relation to chemsex, the anxieties triggered by boundary transgressions often manifest in heightened feelings of anxiety being projected onto chemsex as a destructive force, which must be contained and preferably eliminated. The good gays must protect themselves from the bad ones. This is made clear in some of the newspaper interviews about chemsex during the period of moral panic between 2015 and 2018. For example, Katie Law opened her *Evening Standard* article about chemsex with the claim that it was "destroying parts of the gay community" (Law, 2016). Her claims were based on an interview with Jack Sutherland, a 41-year-old gay man who has experienced an addiction to chemsex and is now three years sober. Jack defined himself as "more of a Ronnie Kray style of gay than [a] Stephen Fry". Ronnie Kray, a gay man, was one half of the professionally violent East London gangster Kray twins, whilst Stephen Fry is a gay middle-class polymath Cambridge graduate. Throughout the interview, reference to Sutherland's hard-man masculinity is reinforced by that which threatened it. His body is intimately described as having "tattooed arms and broad shoulders… every inch the bouncer". Additionally, Sutherland's former career as a bodyguard is referenced alongside his need to hide his sexuality from his colleagues placing him in a precarious and vulnerable position. Up until this moment, he has been publicly discreet about his sexuality, yet in being compelled to talk about chemsex (in order to help prevent others being subjected to its destructive powers) he does the very thing that is most threatening to heterosexuality: declaring that the apparently hegemonically straight man can be gay. For this to be liveable within contemporary society, he must appear to be a good gay, one that it recognisable in reassuringly heterosexual terms. He begins by denouncing chemsex sub-culture as constantly excessive. Such excess is described in relation to the wide availability of HIV-preventive treatments such as PrEP and PEP which he holds up as being a "problem" because gay men "don't need to be afraid of HIV anymore". Equally, his sexual activity under the influence of chemsex is worryingly reflected on as being "at least 15 times [that of] straight men". Drugs thus become constructed as reducing internalised homophobia which had hitherto contained the historic and current threats produced by the potential for an untrammelled homosexuality: drug use by gay men is framed as a destructive threat to internalised homosexuality. To be a "good gay," one must conform to the ideal of a straight-acting man and any form of drugged-up homosexuality

which is released from its shackles of fear becomes constructed as "destructive" in order to justify attempts to eliminate it. This issue extends beyond individuals and sub-cultures, exemplified by Sutherland's situation, reflecting a broader cultural conflict between chemsex and mainstream gay culture.

## From individual to collective destruction

Cultural dispute about the destructive or constructive potential of chemsex is explored further in the mini-documentary on Matt Spikes photographic exhibition that is explored in *Chemsex*. The exhibition itself does not form part of the main *Chemsex* film; however, it was included as a DVD extra which focusses on the film's opening night. At the start of the mini-documentary (similar to Law), Spike notes that "[chemsex] has destroyed the gay scene in so many cities around the world, and it may be starting to do that in London". Chemsex is therefore constructed not only as destructive, but also contagious in how it spreads from city to city. This destructive narrative is carefully crafted into the cinematography and musicality of Spike's photographic exhibition, leaving the viewer/listener with an overwhelming sense of unhappy inevitability about how chemsex is coming, or has already come, to destroy us.

The mini-documentary opens with a blurred but bright image of Soho in London (a key "gay space" on the London scene). Our musical welcome to this scene is typified with synth strings playing slow major chords, whilst the scene comes into focus. Diatonically harmonious strings enhance this and when compared to the rest of the documentary's use of foreboding granular synths, we are left with a gay scene which appears to be warm and welcoming. As Alderson (2016) suggests, when binaries appear in relation to sexuality, they mark a pivot point between innocence and its loss. The musical binary constructed between the gay scene and the chemsex scene implores us to see certain acts and events as symbolic turning points as a decline in a romanticised gay scene.

The viewer/listener is then taken from this romanticised gay scene into the space of the gallery, the camera takes us on a tour. At first, the images are blurred and the focus of the camera remains on the back of the heads of other people viewing the various photographs. The calm soothing chords continue and as the viewer/listener we are invited to take a detached calm view about the topic of chemsex. However, the strings begin to fade when we are forced to adopt a first-person view of a man injecting into his arm with a pained face. Earlier feelings of innocence only heighten the sense of destruction that is occurring. Musical silence then follows with Matt Spike saying "I just want people to make up their own minds about what they see", which as noted in previous chapters is often a carefully curated vision of the chemsex scene which re-crises past narratives about gay male sexuality. We then see several shortcuts of people viewing the images, either alone or in small groups, talking, leaving us, the viewers, filled with the anxious solitude of our own thoughts about the pained expressions in the images in the gallery. The voice of David Stuart interrupts the viewing of the last of these images saying

"Hi everybody, have you all had chance to look at the artwork"? His voice is recognisable from the main film as the Chemsex lead for 56 Dean Street sexual health clinic. Stuart continues to introduce the exhibition by saying that creating dialogue about chemsex is "challenging" and that whilst the exhibition may "glamorise" chemsex, it also "gets people talking". As with the main *Chemsex* film itself, this mini-documentary is "inflected from the outset by the melodramatic and pathologizing filmic treatment of the phenomenon" (Davis, 2019: pg 211). The dialogue that has been crafted musically instils a sense of fear into the audience that lures us into a sense of the need for a Kleinian pre-emptive strike.

At the moment of "talking" about chemsex, a new musical motif begins in the form of the totemic granular synths that mark our departure from the romanticised gay scene. As we view pictures of people looking at needles the music swells, but unlike the smooth calming chords present at the start of the film, the intervals between the notes in this new motif have no clear melodic centre. In addition, this melody is three octaves lower than the introductory strings and the fact that these low granular synth sounds are beyond the pitch of any human voice only adds to the idea that chemsex is an underworld-like inhuman space in which one gets lost. After the first loop of this four-note motif, we are told by David Stuart that the exhibition is "polarising", between people who say it is erotic versus people who say it is disturbing. Yet, the audience is never offered any way to construct the erotic nature of chemsex; instead, the teleology of chemsex is recounted by Matt Spike: it often starts off as a pleasurable experience but turns into one that destroys people's psyches. A half-synthetic, half natural motif continues to loop whilst Matt Spike describes the madness of drug use amongst gay men who oscillate between household cleaning, masturbating, Grindr, and having panic attacks (there is no mention of pleasure). After this, Spike suggests that not only does chemsex have the potential to destroy people's psyches, it also "destroys the gay scenes around the world". At this point, a piano melody (which seems to be holding a confused tension about chemsex) gives way to another synthetic hurricane noise, suggesting that chemsex is an approaching and destructive storm. A dialogue has been opened up about chemsex, but similar to the one opened up earlier by Law, it is one which sees chemsex as being a disturbing, unnatural force which acts to destroy a warm and comforting gay scene. Chemsex has become transposed as a cultural pathology, representing a mutation within gay communities that now presents us with a choice: to destroy or be destroyed. The desire to protect against chaos and destruction by means of a pre-emptive strike on chemsex grows.

## Constructing to destroy

The portrayal of chemsex as the antithesis of a romanticised welcoming gay culture helps build the moral argument against chemsex, justifying efforts to eliminate it. Dan Beeson's (2016) work in *Gay Star News* offers a particularly prescient example of this construct to destroy logic. His reflections start when he sees an image of an ex-boyfriend celebrating his engagement. For Beeson, this signifies

a "long-term and genuine connection". Apart from this one photo he has no other reported insight into his former boyfriend's relationship. Instead, the image of The Engagement is counterposed against the world of chemsex, which Beeson laments is "volatile… a minefield… [of] corrosive behaviour" in which drugs "unite and then divide and conquer". The division that Beeson speaks about is one in which people become isolated copies of one another, devoid of any sense of uniqueness, but also set apart from a culture of good gays who prize "Sunday roasts with friends". Beeson longs to "break free" from the chemsex culture he has become part of, to become part of that typified by the marrying, Sunday roast gays, where one can find a "true experience". What this fails to recognise is that the image of the marrying Sunday-roasting homosexual is little more than a bland simulacrum of idealised heterosexual culture predicated on a normative Monday to Friday pattern of work, in which plentiful resources are brought in by one man to allow (or demand) his wife to cook elaborate meals, set around rituals that prize the Sunday roast as a family focussed event after church. Internalisation of this achingly heteronormative ideal, first projected onto his ex-boyfriend, and then read as symbolic for how chemsex culture can lead to the failure of gay men to roast their way to a happy homonormative life, is presented as justification for constructing chemsex as a destructive void. This constitutes what Berlant (2011) has referred to as cruel optimism, in which ones desires and hopes are placed onto things that are fundamentally unattainable, unsustainable, or even harmful. Whilst cruel optimism may initially provide a sense of meaning, purpose, and possibility, it generates ongoing frustration, anxiety, and disappointment. The idea that homonormativity can provide one with happiness carries a warm glow, and it is certainly true that several participants in this study did not gain meaningful relationships from their chemsex activities. For example, Seamus noted there was a certain 'disposability' to chemsex acquaintances when he said:

> "*it's very difficult for you to have a relationship with the person that you've met, because you know that you've met one another for sex, on chems, and, well, that he's going to do the same thing, or you're going to do the same thing next week, or whenever you take drugs next*".

However, a sense of alienation within relationships is not unique to chemsex. Instead, as Simmel (1971) noted, it is a long-recognised feature of relationships in metropolitan life where interaction takes place on the basis of impersonality and instrumentality. Whilst Simmel notes that the metropolis can offer opportunities for personal development, self-expression, and individual differentiation as compared to life in traditional rural or small-town communities, increased freedom also brings with it a sense of isolation and fragmentation as individuals become more self-reliant and detached from traditional social ties and collective values.

Gay men in the metropolis, where traditional social ties no longer dictate their lives, can therefore become freed to engage in chemsex. Yet, when they become freed to do chemsex, chemsex quickly becomes constructed as *the* destructive

force risking the continued existence of metropolitan gay life. Yet, as Andrew noted above, this destruction can also be observed to act on the *"entire oppressive nexus… telling me what I'm supposed to wear, where I'm supposed to shop"*: the oppressive nexus is more akin to the egregious effects of capitalism itself, not chemsex. As Fisher notes "the scale of the threat" (pg 19) to capitalism is always responded to in proportion to the risk, it poses to the extraction of capital from people, places, and identities which necessitates an oppressive nexus that tells one how to consume. In other words, the greater the destructive potential of chemsex to capitalism, the bigger the threat that capitalism constructs chemsex to be.

That said, this does not answer the question about what it means for gay men to move into different spaces, leaving behind them a multitude of bar and club closures that have hitherto offered a modicum of safety and pleasure. This is a broader trend which has occurred across many large metropolises such as London (Hakim, 2018) and still requires a more detailed analysis of the value of queer space.

## On the value of queer space

Oswin (2008: pg 100) has suggested "for as long as non-heterosexuals are discriminated against, queer spaces will remain something that, to borrow Spivak's phrase, queers cannot not want". Whatever one's view about the gay scene, and however, one sees it as being destroyed or not, it would be foolish to suggest that its demise is entirely unproblematic. So long as queer lives are at worst violently threatened, and at best unable to experience freedom and joy within a hegemonic straight culture, we cannot but want queer spaces. However, it should not be forgotten that what is being destroyed is the consequence of large-scale socioeconomic political change in the latter part of the twentieth century that gave rise to commercial enterprises that must (at least appear to) uphold the values of capitalist states. To do anything other than this would likely result in licences being lost, venues being closed down, and bars, clubs, saunas, and other environments being raided (Brown, 2009).

This upholding of mainstream conservative values occurs across a range of registers from the overt to much more subtle placing of materials. For example, early on in the research in February 2016, in Sweatbox gay sauna in London, I saw the following sign inside the locker (see Figure 6.1).

As I noted in my field notes at the time, the final two sentences transform the performative posturing present in the text into something that shames patrons: "Do you really want your friends and family finding out you died in a gay sauna?". A strictly monitored regime ensures that the venue continues to align with the licensing regulations applicable to a commercial venue. In the film *Chemsex*, the owner of Sweatbox Sauna shows how staff can monitor patrons on CCTV and also how he can monitor patrons remotely from his own home. Such systems produce a certain sense of constant surveillance, invoking the panoptic quality of power.

In late 2018, Sweatbox Sauna closed to undergo a refurbishment, this was described by the owners in resolutely neoliberal and health-based terms as an exciting


*Figure 6.1* Sign inside Sweatbox Sauna locker.

refurbishment "to improve our customers' experience" as well as expand "our community outreach… to provide sexual health screening and counselling" (Brown, 2018). However, the new refurbishment also involved more subtle ways of controlling patrons to ensure the messy gay did not cause the sauna to lose its licence to profit from gay sex. This included a new entry system where patrons had to deposit all their valuables into a small lockable box before entering, not vastly dissimilar to the processes one might undergo before entering police custody, though in the case of the sauna this box can then be accessed once inside so long as this occurs under the close supervision of staff. One then is required to get changed in

an area overlooked by the bar staff and others present, and where any remaining possessions are placed into a wire mesh locker. Seamless lines of sight are created between bar staff and the changing area, and a panoptic mode of viewing emerges. Wearing of anything but a towel is also forbidden meaning that patrons' bodies remain always under the gaze of the staff and it becomes (almost) impossible to sequester drugs. You then trade your locker key for a contactless fob which provides access to the main sauna where CCTV remains but staff are rarely seen. Access to lockers is only granted when one wishes to leave. The more overt locker signs have therefore been replaced by much more diffused but no less insistent practices in which constant visibility rather than moralised messages are used discipline the (bad) gay man. Furthermore, around the same time a plethora of chemsex services began to be advertised (see Figure 6.2).

Alongside the flyers and booklets promoting pleasure were those that encouraged gay men to engage in "significant behaviour change". Others make it clear that this coded message was in fact about how to participate in chemsex in a way such that one's consumption does not result in "struggling to maintain… [a] career" when productive potential is channelled in the wrong direction: that is, towards pleasure. The re-organisation of space and the assemblage of reading materials present in Sweatbox around the time of its renovation are redolent of what Karlsen and Villadsen (2016) identify as ensuring health promotion becomes "less a matter of correcting and normalizing behaviours (as in Foucauldian discourse) than of encouraging practices of consumption and pleasure that remain within certain sensible limits" (pg 21).

In this case, the sensible limits are those that contain homosexuality within a space that allows capital to be extracted through marketisation. Yet, capitalism is


*Figure 6.2* Health and advertising literature in Sweatbox Sauna.

not just about disciplining bad gays to consume correctly. As Harvey (2010) notes from the 1970s onwards, social movements pertaining to sexuality have become largely subservient to capital which has figured out "ways to exploit and manipulate them, both in terms of fracturing hitherto important class solidarities and by commodifying and channelling affective and effective demands associated with these movements into niche markets" (pg 131). Even if chemsex may have played its part in destroying spaces which gay men have created for themselves under late capitalism, new spaces and new desires will continue to be created to serve the interests of capital throughout the 21st century.

## The Sober Gay Man

A key example of how capital functions to commodify and channel the bad gays into a niche market can be seen in the well-publicised promotional material of Resort 12, a "luxury" alcohol and drug rehab centre for LGBT+ people in Chiang Mai, Thailand. As discussed in a *Vice* article (the same company who produced the film *Chemsex*), the centre offers personal care from "hunky personal trainers" and creative therapy sessions from "a choreographer for very famous people" (Azwar, 2019). All of this is provided in order that "clients [can] meet [members of] their own community on their very first day" (Azwar, 2019). The "community" explicitly catered for here are gay men who have faced challenges in accessing drug and alcohol rehabilitation services sensitive to the needs of those who do chemsex. The word "community" as used here also stands as an obfuscating placeholder for the heavy costs of the luxury rehabilitation experience which comes in at just under USD $15 000 for a four-week stay. The need for such a centre is justified by saying that it is "just a fact" that clients "wouldn't go near" rehab centres with "rusty broken beds" (Azwar, 2019).

By these means, the idea of gay community quickly becomes fractured, repackaged, and sold as a luxury item. Any demands for solidarity quickly dissipate by becoming subservient to the "fact" of some people's need for a luxury experience. All of this has occurred without any critical reflection on the circular production and extraction of profit from gay identity and The Sober Gay Man becomes subsumed into wider forms of marketing well beyond chemsex.

Similar processes can be seen in relation to James Wharton's chemsex expose (examined in more detail in Chapter 3) which turned itself into a wider exercise in lifestyle branding for all gay men. Having (largely) renounced chemsex himself, Wharton becomes one of the 'good gays', appearing in *Attitude* magazine where he was interviewed by Matt Cain (2017). The main message in the article is that chemsex has destroyed the gay scene Wharton experienced when he was 18, and that now gay men only talk to each other via apps to establish the most salient features of potential partners: top or bottom; dick and ass pics; and accommodate or travel. Within this pared down, more 'efficient' channelling of homosexuality Wharton has experienced things which he describes as "more harrowing than [witnessed during] his time in the army" (Cain, 2017: pg 62) when he served in Iraq.

There can be no doubt that Wharton did experience some traumatic events, one of which was waking up being raped after having taken GBL. However, he does not take a prohibitionist approach to chemsex. Instead, he continues to engage periodically in chemsex with a timeframe measured in months rather than days. There is no attempt to describe any of these subsequent experiences of chemsex as pleasurable; instead, they are talked about in the language of recovery. The use of terminology like "relapses" and "mishaps" makes it clear that chemsex for Wharton it is something that is a continuous struggle to renounce. This narrative of chemsex is accompanied by professionally taken photographs of Wharton with captions such as "James wears polo shirt by Sunspel […] t-shirt by Topman […] Bumble and bumble and MAC cosmetics" (Cain, 2017: pg 63–66). Some of the major male fashion brands are therefore used to support this previously 'bad gay' demi-redemption in that he now offers a positive and marketable image, perfect in his imperfection, which brands can confidently attach themselves to, assured that any drug-related experiences will fit a dominant narrative of something to repent from. No longer therefore are bad gay men to be corrected via criminal sanctions, aversion therapies, or medical castration. Instead, they are to be subjected to a system which simultaneously produces and profits from spaces, identities, rituals, and language practices which appear to offer freedom but only to those who consume responsibly. When chemsex begins to challenge these limits by refusing to self-discipline, it becomes a threat to the gay body politic who have gained "political clout and economic power" from investing their labour and gay identity in the capitalist project (Doan & Higgins, 2011).

## Is chemsex anti-capitalist?

All of the above is not to say that of its essence chemsex is anti-capitalist. As Mowlabocus (2021) has said, there is an ambiguous politics to chemsex which can share many of capitalism's more egregious features. This was noted by Ryan in his final interview who said that whilst initially chemsex "*started as quite a lovely experience… it got out of hand"*. He ascribed this to chemsex being

> "*the Olympics of sex… stronger, faster, bigger, harder… More, more, more. And you set yourself a boundary or you find a boundary and then you push beyond it and then you're like oh, what's next? What's next? What's next? And then it becomes this… It almost becomes like an endless race to be the dirtiest"*.

This closely parallels Alderson's (2016) critique of how capitalism brings other cultural by-products into gay sub-cultures such as the neoliberalisation of the porn industry which has resulted in the "competitive pressure to be kinkier, filthier and more brutal" (pg 139). Alderson argues that the marketing of gay desire has resulted in a repackaging of sexuality as 'always new' and always telling us to desire more in order to ensure that profit can be extracted from gay desires. To resist the capitalist commodification and intensification of gay desire can leave us feeling

like we have a "sanctimonious virtue [that] we never suspected we harboured" (Alderson, 2016: pg 141).

Drawing on a case study of the Atlanta metropolitan area in the early 2000s, but also drawing on examples from North American and European cities Doan and Higgins (2011) argue such sanctimonious virtues can easily find their way into gay sub-cultures when there is a desire of assimilationist gay men to preserve their capital. These are gay men who advocate for and prioritise integration into mainstream society and its institutions, often disavowing queerer forms of behaviour like chemsex and polyamory, and not challenging or seeking to change the dominant cultural norms and values. In doing so, they often not only accumulate social capital but also financial capital. This allows assimilationist gay men to move into gayborhoods whilst simultaneously forcing out the undesirable gay men (who may use drugs and have orgies) but who were instrumental in forming the gayborhoods as safe places to engage in non-normative queerer lives. Hakim (2018) in his analysis of Vauxhall in Central London notes that when this begins to occur queer spaces and places can quickly begin to be replaced by more profitable enterprises that cater to mainstream society and its institutions impoverishing the infrastructure for queer people to socialise. In summary, when the interests of capital start to be threatened the bad gays find themselves being forced to make a choice: be subsumed into the new homonormativity; become a profitable and marketable identity such as The Sober Gay Man; or become further marginalised and subjected to Kleinian pre-emptive strikes for leading queer lives. Capitalism may have provided transitory benefits for gay men, but its insipient insistence on unity with homonormative ideals leaves one questioning if the destructive potential of chemsex may in fact be strategically productive for resisting this egregious union.

## Manchester and queer commons

As indicated above, LGBT+ neighbourhoods have grown up as 'safe spaces' in many cities in the Western world, and some of these neighbourhood have subsequently undergone processes of normalisation and gentrification. However, to develop an embedded socio-cultural understanding of the processes at work here, it is not sufficient to rely on reference to cities such as London, New York, and San Francisco. The city in which I live and in which this study took place, Manchester, has a very different dynamic being home to long-standing collectivist and socialist movements which together form a type of "queer commons" (Brown, 2009: pg 1508) in which co-operation and pleasure, rather the individuation and profit, are the central motivating ideologies.

For some participants in this study, the ideology underpinning the city fed into the cultural norms surrounding drug use, particularly in the queer rave community. As Michael (in Chapter 2) stated his "*first experience of MDMA was at a small clubnight, a guy I got chatting to gave me a bomb* [a small dose of drug wrapped in cigarette paper]", since then he has attempted to always "*pay this forward, I've always seen drugs as held communally on the dance floor. If someone comes up to*

*me and asks if I have any, I will usually give them some*". However, Michael also noted that he would only do this if the encounter was an exchange not motivated by capital, saying that "*sometimes people will just randomly approach me asking if they can buy stuff… for me that spoils what the dance floor is all about*". Furthermore, he highlighted how on queer club nights, the dance floor is a place where "*everyone is in the same space, dancing together, smiling and smiling back at each other… there's such a wide varieties of bodies on show*". He contrasted this to gay club nights elsewhere, such as XXL in London, where when he smiled at people they ignored him, describing this as being particularly problematic amongst the "*muscle Marys, who were on stage looking to be looked at, but not by you".*

In the queer venues Michael enjoyed, acknowledgement of others was not based purely on sexual desire and having a specific bodily aesthetic to be desirably looked at by the right person. Instead, echoing the porosity discussed in Chapter 4, it was the shared affect of the dance floor he most valued and which he tried to re-create at chemsex parties. For example, he would smoke crystal meth or take a dose of G from the host without any expectation that a financial trade was taking place. He also embraced having sex with a wide range of gay men in terms of body type, social class, and race. Finally, being relatively affluent Michael felt it was always incumbent on him to offer the hosts money towards the cost of the drugs when the party finished, but conversely he felt it odd when rich and wealthy gay men insisted on upfront payments for drugs. Recalling one occasion in London he stated:

> "*… once I was at this party with a lad… he asked me for money for the drugs and then proceeded to tell me that he had paid something like fifty thousand tax that year. I thought fuck me, that means you must be on megabucks. I wouldn't have minded that much but he had had a fair amount of my drugs as well, so I thought we were even, apparently not!*"

For Michael, the social practices prevalent in the clubbing cultures of Manchester directly informed his personal practices with drugs and chemsex. Co-operative and expansive notions of kinship with his fellow clubbers informed how he assessed the morality of people's engagement. For him, similar to Andrew, chemsex was about experiences that challenged some of the more egregious affects present within mainstream gay culture, and by extension, capitalism.

Other participants such as Julian (in Chapter 4) engaged in subtle class-based subversions of financial exchange whilst simultaneously critiquing the capitalist and ultimately unfulfilling nature of the mainstream gay scene. Julian lamented the fact that when out on the gay scene he could:

> "*easily pay twenty quid*[1] *to just get into a club… in fact you could pay six of seven quid just to get into a bar… and you can't guarantee you're going to meet someone and get laid… a bag of MDMA is twenty five quid [and] that's lasts you a couple of nights*".

The implication here being that sex was more likely to be guaranteed at a chemsex party. However, Julian was also clear that his mode of engagement in chemsex culture subverted those of James Wharton. Julian noted that Wharton was of a class that allowed him to regularly take taxis across London and "*buy that second gram [of drugs]*" without having to worry "*that you then can't put the electric on this week*". He found the cultural and financial capital associated with higher social classes was often used in ways that he found exclusionary. Talking about a party he had attended in Chorlton (a wealthy suburb in Manchester known for its large Edwardian houses and eateries) he recounted:

> *"… there was a situation recently, I went to a place in Chorlton, a guy invited me round, and what I didn't know was there was like five in total, two people it was actually their house, and like nobody wanted them two, and it was really quite awkward, they kept trying to get involved in the action with everyone. But the two guys who owned the house and were supplying the drugs actually, they were just quite nice enough people but, yeah, just… And you could tell that one of them got the vibe and was like a bit more respectful and backed off a little bit. The other one was quite keen to sort of like. almost like it's my house, my drugs, you will get me involved; not in a violent way, but, you know, it was just like, 'Yeah, I'm not… this is ruining the vibe'"*

Yet, furthermore, Julian admitted that he often rarely spent any money himself on drugs:

> "*I'm quite good at getting it for free… if people are lonely, they will share their drugs with you… I'm like a running joke between my friends, if I've done it, well, like, you didn't pay a penny…"*

There was therefore a certain imperceptible working-class rebellion occurring in Julian's recognition that some people are willing to trade their social and financial capital for the company of others at a chemsex party. There did remain some form of social etiquette he felt obliged to follow where, "*if we get more M-Cat[2], then I'll chip in for the next round because I want to stay, and I can't not chip in if I'm there and everyone else is getting their wallets out"*. But apart from this, he was happy to trade the emotional labour of providing his company for the space and drugs provided by wealthier individuals. Whilst this could might initially be seen as somewhat grotesque profiting off someone else's loneliness, it does in fact reflect a longer history of working-class people doing emotional labour for the wealthier middle classes. In the work of Ehrenreich (2002), this work classically included jobs such as waitressing and housekeeping, alongside the more general labour of keeping customers happy in low-paid jobs. Julian however extended and subverted this class dynamic. Through his affable character, which would have been more than capable of keeping a lonely

person company, rather than leaving this work unrecognised and unrewarded he was able to extract a form of payment in kind whilst ensuring a degree of pleasure for himself.

## Space, time, and acid communism

The spaces of chemsex and the socio-cultural history of Manchester's socialist and anti-capitalist ideologies inform and offer alternative readings of what chemsex is and can become. Specifically, within this context, chemsex is not purely a destructive force but is only framed this way to facilitate its transformation or elimination, thereby ensuring that gay men may still be aligned with capitalist interests, but, just as capital has crafted new spaces and identities within the city, so has the drug using gay man. In the case of Manchester, socio-cultural histories bleed into and shape what chemsex is. As observed in Chapter 4, the way the spaces of chemsex parties function is key to this, and whilst it can't be ignored chemsex can repeat the competitive effects of capitalism with regards to the "competitive pressure to be kinkier, filthier and more brutal" (Alderson, 2016: pg 139) the challenging of capitalist relations through specific ways of doing chemsex must also be recognised. Whilst some of these are discussed above, returning to Julian's discussion of space and time reveals how chemsex spaces and queer lives also run to a temporal logic different from what those commonly experienced by people who are in more normative social and sexual relationships:

> "*If you're gone for 14 hours it's unlikely, unless you've got a boyfriend or husband or whatever, that people are going to notice you've gone, are they? […] There's a lot of waiting around and there's this mellowness, for want of a better word, when that high has kicked in… it's a bit like fishing.*"

Importantly, rather than being imagined as accelerated forms of living, chemsex parties may better be thought of as slow forms of sex. As Preciado (2013) argues extended pleasure is not the aim under capitalism, what matters is the efficient exploitation of the orgasm. Chemsex can stand against this monologic efficient release of the orgasm which directs so much of modern approaches to sexuality and instead can be understood in line with Fisher's (2020) *Acid Communism* where it becomes possible to engage in "drifting explorations of strange terrains… access to a certain mode of time, time which allows deep absorption [where] the refusal to work [is] also a refusal to internalise the systems of valuation which claimed that one's existence is validated by paid employment" (Fisher, 2020: pg 29).

As Julian noted, chemsex spaces operate with such a different temporal logic. Time for Julian "*governs the real world*", the one of jobs and heteronormative relationships. At a chemsex party, he "*doesn't have to deal with what time represents*" instead in the world of closed off curtains "*jobs don't exist*". The severing of relationships between time, space, and capital become closer to how Fisher articulates acid communism in which "altered states of consciousness could offer a

perception of the systems of power, exploitation, and ritual that are more, not less, lucid" (Fisher, 2020: pg 42).

In other words, there may be a deep absorption in the times, places, and bodies of chemsex, and a porosity may be produced (as in Chapter 4) that goes beyond the most obvious pleasures, where something exists that can teach us lessons on how to engage with the destructive potential of chemsex. Rather than seeing it as a force which must be pre-emptively struck against, it may be better thought of as a deconstructive force for its ability to transport us to new spaces which may not be ruled by the drudgery of capitalism. By dwelling in these spaces, a realisation that "the categories by which we live are plastic, mutable" (Fisher, 2020: pg 41) may begin to take place. Although undoubtedly imperfect, when it connects with and emerges within other sub-cultural contexts, it can take on a deconstructive potential. Chemsex can remind us of the plastic and mutable nature of capitalism. If we can move beyond seeing only the risks of chemsex (which are almost always risks to profit extraction from gay men) and refuse to channel our energy into commercially profitable enterprises such as The Sober Gay Man, then what becomes revealed under in the right circumstances are the liberatory possibilities long imagined for queer identities, but also long forgotten.

## Notes

1 Approximately USD $25.
2 M-cat is a colloquial term for 4-methylmethcathinone, also commonly known as mephedrone. It is a synthetic cathinone, a class of drugs that are related to a key chemical compound in the khat plant, which is used indigenously in eastern and south-eastern Africa. Cathinones can produce effects like euphoria, increased energy, and enhanced sociability, though they can also cause irritability, hallucinations, and psychosis.

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Chapter 7

# The moral lessons of chemsex

## Boundaries, porosity, and penetration

In Chapter 5 of this book, I explored how through chemsex, some gay men playfully engage with boundaries of fear and transgression in their pursuit of community and solidarity. In Chapter 6, I suggested that chemsex has the ability to remind us of the mutable characteristics of some of the powerful hegemonic discourses that structure the life of the liberal subject. In this final chapter, I want to explore in more depth how the porosity of boundaries, which chemsex so readily produces, offers us a moral lesson in relation to some of the most restrictive discourses present in modernity and how resistance to these discourses may emerge in novel ways.

For many gay men though, as outlined in Chapter 1, chemsex is about the disconnect produced by addiction to drugs, which afflicts so many individual gay men on a scale matching that of the HIV pandemic. Whilst such comparisons may lack quantitative validity, it is important to recognise the similar impact on the lives of gay men who suffer greatly or even die as they engage in the quotidian pleasures of gay sub-cultures. However, as has been argued throughout this book whilst public concern about HIV and chemsex galvanised a rapid response, we must also find ways to pause and interrogate the discourses (such as danger and risk) which sometimes fail to critically reflect on the language they draw on.

I have argued elsewhere that a "queer ethics of care" can be identified in relation to HIV that questions traditional professional boundaries between caregivers and patients, and which can catalyse new forms of mutual care in LGBTQ+ communities that dissolve the rigid distinctions between "carers" and "cared for" (Nagington, 2023). This has given rise to a new understanding of the ethics of care, which has at its core a constant critique of existing power relations. In relation to HIV, this initially operated by challenging the physical isolation of people living with HIV but developed into wider actions to bring an end to social, psychological, and cultural isolation. Breaking the boundaries that had been erected between HIV-positive and HIV-negative individuals was a core part of this queer ethics of care and such a history reminds us that even in the face of risk and fear it is possible to find a relational form of ethics that creates both interpersonal and political change (Day, 2021; The Care Collective, 2020). Drawing on similar social histories and theory,

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Duff (2015) has explored what a Foucauldian ethics of care would mean for drug policy. He argues that "moral problems are rarely resolved by recourse to absolute principles" (pg 86) such as the notions of autonomy or beneficence so commonly used in the health and medical sciences to adjudicate on ethical dilemmas. Instead, he argues that the morality of drug use is best thought of as a product of the ability of members of a community to "sustain relationships of trust, compassion, fairness and respect" (Duff, 2015: 86) in ways that emphasise their relational qualities. Yet, the process of identifying drug users often occurs within a medicalised discursive framework which aims to isolate and treat the individual. Such perspectives preclude understanding of the connections of care that Duff identifies as abounding in the participants he has worked with. With regard to the ethics of chemsex, Florencio (2020) notes that this may pertain to disrupting dominant views of masculinity and individualism by embracing a radical openness to external substances and queer experiences. However, this final chapter wishes to argue that ethical thinking must be more than just radically disruptive. It can be as Osserman (in press) suggests more banal, where we think with, rather than against, those who have been placed on the other side of a boundary. When we recognise chemsex as just another form of a connection-making activity, it becomes easier to think about the persistent rather than exceptional nature of those connections.

With regard to the nature of these connections, Dean (2009) offers a productive foundation. Dean argues that the porosity of the body to HIV offers one way of theorising alternative forms of kinship and that boundaries that have previously kept the other at a safe distance become more open to penetration. In this concluding chapter, whilst the eroticism of penetration may include the readily incorporated categories of sexual penetration which Dean's work is intimately linked to, it also goes beyond these to include any other possible way in which we can enter into the other, such as (but not exclusively) those described in Chapter 4 in relation to the penetration through aural means. By developing such understandings, it is possible to both open up the self and the other to the transformative potentials of mutual penetration. This final chapter is therefore a meditation on the front cover image from the film *Slammed*: the blurring of boundaries between the self and other (which chemsex so readily produces) can paradoxically help bring into focus our ethical ties to one another. Embracing rather than effacing this penetration and porosity is at the heart of the moral lessons of chemsex.

## Chemsex as disconnection

Among others, Foucault (1973) argued that in modern medicine, patients become discursively isolated by the language practices deployed by professionals that alienate patients from their body and illness. In addition, spaces become established where patients remain isolated as if they were laboratory experiments where they "become a field of scientific investigation" (Foucault, 1973: pg xv) so that extraneous variables can be controlled or preferably removed. Foucault referred to these practices as constituting the medical gaze. The discursive construction of a figure

isolated by the medical gaze can be found in the burgeoning literature on chemsex and addiction. On the one hand, there is a growing body of neuroscientific research that views chemsex as leaving an indelible trace on individual neuronal pathways (Fawcett, 2015). As Dennis (2019) notes, such neuroscientific studies often rely on knowledge derived from experiments in which participants are given a particular drug and then placed in a scanner isolated from the variable "qualities and potential directions the substance can take" (pg 12). Connection as a possibility is precluded by such research which claims truths about the ways in which drugs (rather than particular modes of research) serve to distort patterns of connection. In the case of chemsex, what appears is the figure of an isolated gay man, which the medical gaze is quick to understand through its lack of connection. For example, David Stuart (2013), whilst often arguing for communal responses to how the gay community need to care for one another regarding chemsex, still portrays addiction as behaviours relating to the individual. For example, he notes how gay men erroneously fail to see themselves as "addicted" to their "general lifestyle" (Stuart, 2013: pg 8). Using what Foucault (1973) refers to as a "meticulous gaze" to "shape things as they really are" (pg xii), Stuart uses this approach to construct the drug-using gay man as: a "reluctant and ambivalent person" who needs to be given "take home questionnaires" to "reflect on [his] choices" (Stuart, 2013: pg 9) so that they too can reach the only true conclusion: that they are an addict.

Once isolated in this teleology the gay male patient can then become further subjected to the medical gaze through a range of interventions focusing on behavioural and cognitive variables such as abstinence, stimulus control, and exposure therapy (Iking & Gruemer, 2021). Together, these forms of intervention aim to turn the addicted subject into a self-transformative subject (Carton, 2014), one who must be separated from others until it can be proven he has transformed himself. However, as Davis (2019) notes, when gay men become subjected to such clinical encounters they are not 'free' at all. Instead, they have been fixed and isolated by a gaze which refuses any connection with ideas and concepts that might separate the subject from chemsex. Any understanding about the inherent 'constructedness' of the boundaries they must maintain (as argued in Chapter 5), or how chemsexers must invest in identities which are profitable for the wider mechanisms of mainstream capitalist society (as argued in Chapter 6) are rarely if ever reflected on. Instead, the medical gaze on chemsex constructs a representation that is always and already isolated. One final examination of the film *Chemsex* helps demonstrate how this image becomes taken up by cultural representations that help to circulate and reinforce its disciplinary power.

We never learn the name of the protagonist in the opening scenes of the film *Chemsex* nor, within the logic of the medical gaze which constructs him, do we need to. Much like the stereotypical way in which patients may be spoken about in hospital wards as "the hip replacement in bed two", the opening character is purely a medical subject to be looked upon as an example of pathology to bring truth to a series of statements that immediately follow his opening scenes. The medical gaze, after presenting its subject like a doctor on a ward round for all his juniors to observe, presents

the viewer with the correct reading of the situation via two intertitles with white text on a black background. The first of these reads, "There is a hidden health emergency amongst London's gay community", and second one says "Over one calendar year we invited gay men to discuss their experiences with sex and drugs". Immediately after this, a montage of talking heads appears (see Figure 7.1), some obscured by red veils almost mirroring the veiling of the subject in the Catholic confessional.

Just as Foucault (1990) argued confession leads to knowledge which can be used to perfect control over the subject, the same is occurring here in the development of confessional knowledge about chemsex. The heads' confessing voices slowly start to overlap with one another, and there is no sense of communication taking place between any of the men – they are isolated confessing subjects. The cacophony of voices is only stilled when David Stuart appears, the man who often receives such confessions in his clinic later in the film. Not only therefore does the film represent men as isolated, but it also presents them as transformed from chaos into quiet order by the presence of a medical representative who produces the processes of confession and knowledge extraction. Chemsex when scrutinised by the medical gaze becomes an individual pathology: diagnosed, treated, and ultimately portrayed as an inherently isolating activity. When chemsex becomes constructed within the medical gaze which operates so powerfully through the cinematic language in *Chemsex,* as well as through the discursive regimes discussed in Chapter 2, connection between gay men through chemsex becomes an ontological impossibility.

Later, the Chemsex film attempts (but fails) to defend itself against this critique by presenting a well-organised sex party as an example of chemsex as a communal activity. However, a closer reading of the production and editing of these scenes quickly undoes this. The footage of these scenes was shot by Liam Cole of Treasure Island Media, the same director of *Slammed*, discussed in Chapter 4. As Paul Morris notes, the cinematography in Treasure Island Media films is predicated on a dialectic process in which the hand-held camera turns towards the most erotic sites of sex (Lupi, 2015). The pointing of the camera also acts as a way of enhancing the

*Figure 7.1* Talking heads in opening scene of *Chemsex* film

pleasures upon which it finds itself intuitively resting upon. A resonance is thereby set up between the director, the camera, and the viewer that helps build a sense of eroticism, pleasure, and orgasm effacing the boundaries between all involved. In this way, the camera becomes more than just a passive receiver of action. Instead, there are transgressions of boundaries between director, actors, and viewers. Whilst the fourth wall (the imaginary barrier between the characters in a film and the audience watching it) is rarely broken in Treasure Island Media films, the boundaries between subject and camera playfully enhance the erotic effects of being penetrated.

No such relationship exists between the camera and the subject in the clips edited together to form the sex party scenes in *Chemsex*. There are no pleasurable cinematographic transgressions; instead, the camera is often static and when it is mobile the only footage presented to us comes from wide angle shots holding the chemsexing gay men at a safe distance to gaze at. This gaze does not enhance the pleasure and it is entirely devoid of faces, all either cropped or blurred. The relationship the viewer has with the men in this scene is therefore characterised by a further disconnection which fails to reparate the isolationist logic which pervades the film. The men in the scene are thereby reduced in their ability to connect with the audience, and instead, addiction as representational ontology continues to pervade the film. In other words, even during the scenes when one may reasonably expect representations of connection to be present, it is absent. All that exists is the underlying idea that addiction disconnects, and this underlies the framing of multiple scenes in the film.

## Chemsex as connection

Representing a diverse sub-culture across a medical literature and in film as a series of isolated and isolating individuals is highly problematic. Not only is it a logical fallacy in the sense that sub-cultures are inherently about relationships and the co-production of rituals and artefacts which transmit meaning, but it also actively effaces the connections that occur beyond a medical gaze which aims to observe in order to further isolate. It would, of course, be foolish to dismiss the pain of isolation which can (and does) accompany chemsex for some people. The reported experiences of many charities and services for people who have problems with chemsex offer a clear demonstration of how the transition into or out of chemsex spaces can occur because of, or be experienced as, isolation. Yet, the experience of isolation need not become the ontology of chemsex, since doing so purposefully stymies its potential as a cultural phenomenon to facilitate the formation of new forms of sociality and new connections. When such connections are refused, it becomes impossible to allow chemsex to connect to and critique broader societal structures. This precludes one of the central ethical pillars in Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy which emphasises the importance of processes, connections, and the continuous transformation of individuals and societies. Deleuze and Guattari themselves broadly rejected that drugs can be a constituent part of these ethical processes. However, Malins (2004) disagreeing with them "mutates" a famous

passage from Deleuze and Guattari's *Thousand Plateaus*, replacing the idea of "the book" with "the drug using body" to conceptualise the latter as a "little machine" which connects and transforms possibilities for living (pg 84). For Malins, there is a constant "pressure to stratify and organise" the signifiers that are available to use in life, but this rarely extends to forcing compliance in how to read a book, a body, or any other signifying machine. Instead, just as with the people in the *Chemsex* film who volunteered to be represented by an omnipotent isolating medical gaze, there is a reassuring constancy which is provided when one "limits the connections… [namely], the potential for difference" (Malins, 2004: pg 87).

## Reassuring representation

The reassuring constancy of the medical gaze does not just stratify and organise the cultural representations of gay men (made by straight men), it also shapes how gay men represent themselves. In my third interview with Julian, we discussed in detail the work of the LGBT Foundation[1] in Manchester. Julian noted that "*their substance misuse programmes are fantastic…*" and had found them very helpful for himself. Similar comments were made by other participants who had accessed support from the LGBT Foundation over the years, either for drug and alcohol use, or for other needs such as sexual health screening and counselling. The need for, and the quality of the services offered, is therefore not at stake here. What matters though is how the LGBT+ community is represented in the public domain. Julian and I went on to discuss an "LGBT community notice board" (see Figure 7.2)


*Figure* 7.2 Manchester LGBT Foundation notice board

placed in a prominent part of Canal Street, the main gay district in Manchester. It was covered in messages for alcohol and drugs services, HIV testing, and hate crime reporting. Bisexual and trans people were given a little space, whilst lesbians were only identifiable by a single word amongst everything else. Putting aside the obvious lack of diversity, reflecting on this Julian said that the idea that "*the only thing the gay community does is have problems with drugs… [is] a message that gets sent out worldwide… we do more than have sex, take drugs, and get insulted*".

This "more than", or the potential for difference, is what Deleuze and Guattari call "lines of flight", a reference to one of their philosophical tools that signifies paths of escape from established structures and boundaries, whereby individuals can seek to break free from conventional limitations and explore new, uncharted possibilities. Lines of flight go beyond the known to signal creative and transformative ways of thinking and being through multiplying, not diminishing, connections. Contrary to Deleuze and Guattari's own views on drugs, Malin's offers a compelling re-reading of their work arguing that the morality of drugs must be approach from their capacity to "increase or reduce each body's power to act and its potential to go on forming new relations… emerging with a strengthened – or at least undiminished – potentiality" (Malins, 2004: pg 97). These new relations may connect with wider society to challenge and re-read some of the discourse that structures the understanding, and moral superiority, of established ways of living lives. Just as queer theorists such as Warner (2000) and Ward (2020) have argued that queer sub-cultures have much to teach us about contemporary society, as well enabling productive connections between gay men (Nagington, 2015), chemsex may allow participants to make connections beyond the oppressive discourses which position them in isolated self-erasure. This is the core moral lesson of chemsex.

## Chemsex as connection

Julian in his second interview noted (with some disappointment) that the connections provided chemsex "*don't translate into everyday life*". However, as stressed throughout this book, the everyday life of a chemsexing gay man is one in which he stands alone with a history of homophobia behind him and a disciplinary apparatus ready to transform any experiences of chemsex into pathology, trauma, and tragedy. He may only gain access to the pseudo-collectivity of a commercial gay scene which insists his identity is only valid if capital can be extracted from it. When presented with such everyday challenges the isolated gay male subject only has one option available: retreat to a space in which one's identity becomes safely homonormative and well positioned to serve the discourses that produce the isolated self-erasure of the chemsexing gay man. He is taken away from the bodies of men, which might have offered something to transform the fearful individual. His identity serves only as a means to transact and be transacted. Any feeling of communality is produced solely to reproduce an identity that is profitable and self-sustaining. Collectivity and connection exist only through the medium of marketability, targeting subjects who are isolated to enhance the controlled

extraction of capital. In other words, collectivity has been hitherto been constructed as anathema in chemsex: it risks nothing, and only allows for a series of bounded individuals to come together to transact and be transacted, never to challenge the moral nature of their collectivity. However, there is another form of collectivity that emerges out of the construction of chemsex in this book: a porosity that holds the possibility for a different set of foundations upon which to reimagine morality. It is this latter collectivity that may make lives more liveable by producing rather than precluding possibilities for connection.

For Butler (2004a, 2004b, 2009), making lives more liveable is mediated by language practices whereby groups may resist and subvert oppressive discourses and power structures. These practices include reclaiming derogatory language, disrupting harmful speech patterns, and articulating counter-narratives that challenge systems of oppression. Additionally, the necessity to constantly repeat these discourses through the processes of living one's life means that errors can creep in. Whilst sometimes these errors are rapidly and violently disciplined, in other cases these errors may manifest more as an inability for contemporary power structures to capture and represent the self. In such cases, new categories and possibilities for living may emerge. Critique therefore involves deconstructing the language that perpetuates stereotypes, biases, and discriminatory attitudes and examining the possibilities for new ways of living to emerge that empower marginalised voices and perspectives. However, there is something missing from this picture. Bodies themselves can connect it ways that offer the possibility for the foundations for resistance to develop in ways that do not rely on language. Butler herself notes the existence of "embodied actions" (Butler, 2015b: pg 8) that are produced and circulate outside of linguistic frameworks. But importantly, as explored in Chapter 4, the embodied actions that circulate between the bodies of chemsexing subjects are not fully controlled by the self. Instead to paraphrase Barthes what is produced in the interactions is the *grain* of the body (the sounds of orifices and bodies at sex): which carries with it something of, and to, the Other, both indelible and durable in ways that it exceeds the will of both subjects involved in such an exchange, but which violates neither. What emerges here are connections which can be thought of as "provisional and plural forms of co-existence that constitute social and ethical alternatives" (Butler, 2015a: pg 16), but which under the prevailing disciplinary apparatuses of chemsex are rendered unintelligible.

## Acid connection

What therefore needs to be addressed is the pseudo-collectivity, which only ever brings together people to transact and be transacted, and in so doing places a pressure on people to become increasingly entrepreneurial in their approach to the self and to others: fancifully obliviating the reality of how we rely on others. Fisher (2020) following Butler notes this is one of the key ways in which capitalism installs itself as constantly and unquestionably self-sustaining. The precarity of being an individual who must sustain themself has come to take on a moral imperative in

modern Western ideas of what it means to be a "good" person, making it (almost) impossible to "move towards something radically other" (Foucault, 1991: pg 121). Such movements for Foucault however were striven with always having to escape and evade the power structures which had come to seep into the body of the individual. In order to resist and move towards something radically other, Foucault (2002: pg 19) suggested one must:

> "change again and shift position… [prepare] a labyrinth into which I can venture, into which I can move my discourse… in which I can lose myself and appear at last to eyes that I will never have to meet again… Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order. At least spare us their morality when we write".

Such writing brings with it a certain eroticism of cruising. Moving between bodies to lose oneself in eyes that one will never have to meet again is after all, one of the basic structures of cosmopolitan gay lives. Yet to engage in a process of becoming-unrecognisable risks placing oneself in an ethical quandary in which the recognisability by others (and the connections that come with that process) becomes impossible. It leaves the other as an object to which one has no ties, and because of this no ethical obligations. As Butler (2005) argues, all lives need to be lived in a way that recognises their enduring connections with others and the responsibility that arises out of this recognition of communality. To fail to do so, is to fail to recognise a basic tenant of human morality. In conclusion, Butler notes that Foucauldian strategies that efface connections "can only undermine [rather than] rearticulate the terms… by which subjects are constituted" (Butler, 1997: pg 89).

As outlined in Chapter 6, one of the most fundamental and restrictive ways in which gay male subjects are constituted is in relation to capitalism. Whilst other forms of subject constitution can and do occur, such as through the medicalisation of gay male sexuality, capitalism has installed itself as the dominant ideology in society, around which all others must organise themselves. In doing so, the gay male subject becomes isolated and profitable in all his moral deviancy, sobriety and pathology. All that is required is that, to paraphrase Fisher (2009), the chemsex gay man buys or sells the right product. Anything which results in the body of a chemsexing gay man coming into proximity with another is (and indeed must) only be a temporary and secondary effect. He must remain appropriately isolated (not free), responsible, and (most importantly) an exploited and exploitable individual.

As Fisher (2009) has identified, capitalism has become so perversely successful at effacing our relationships with others because it has managed to claim that there is no viable alternative. A Foucauldian labyrinth of unconnected subversion will not therefore help rearticulate these terms of engagement which have been ingrained in British culture since at least the time of British Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who claimed that "there is no such thing as society". Instead, Foucault's unconnected subversion risks inadvertently reinforcing the

capitalist isolation of subjects. To address this problem, a new dualistic approach is needed: one which simultaneously attacks the more egregious effects of capitalism; and, another that builds the foundation for a coherent and collectively constructed alternative.

Chemsex or at least some sociocultural constructions of it may offer "the tiniest event [that] can tear a hole in the grey curtain of the reaction [against capitalism as inevitable] which has marked the horizon of possibility" (Fisher, 2009: pg 81). In other words, it is not being argued here that chemsex *always* offers the potential to rearticulate the terms under which the modern subject is constructed. As noted in Chapter 6, it can repeat them, alongside the other egregious discourses that isolate and separate gay men. However, it is important to recognise how chemsex *can* tear at the inevitability of capitalism and rip it further apart. In doing so, chemsex may reveal connections that can momentarily become recognised as a mini-destruction of the perversely successful ways in which capitalism isolates subjects.

As Colquhoun writes in the introduction to Fisher's (2020) *Acid Communism,* challenges to capitalism must be built on "alingusitic feedback loops" that offer the hope of building a collective subject, "reinstantiating a politics to come" (pg 6). Chemsex finds resonance with this. The bodies of the chemsexing gay men offer a way in which to recognise, imagine, and embrace the collective subject. The building of collectivity and porosity begins when the sounds and vocal utterances of bodies having chemsex are interchanged and transmitted from body to ear, as well as through digital means. The most intimate, subliminal, and transitory expressions of the body thereby become a way of imagining both the destruction of relentless individualisation as well as recognising and embracing our collectivity. This is reacted against so ferociously in the forms of media and health panics as to reveal the significant potential of chemsex to build solidarity build between bodies. Yet, the reaction against it fails to counter what I identify as the 'visceral solidarity' which is built slowly and quietly through alinguistic loops. The indelible collectivity through the exchange of grains of bodies avoids the disciplinary mechanisms that operate via language to discipline bodies.

In many ways, visceral solidarity is redolent in the eerie ties between Preciado and Dustan in *Testo Junkie*. As discussed in Chapter 3, in the opening chapter of *Testo Junkie*, after finding out about Dustan's death, Preciado writes of Dustan enveloping him. This was not despite, but because of the trauma and grief that shattered Preciado's sense of self, which reveals to us something about the intangible conjoining of subjects. As Butler notes, death:

> "delineates the ties we have with others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are… it is not as if an 'I' exists independently over here and then simply loses a 'you' over there… when we lose some of these ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or what to do. On one level I think I have lost 'you' only to discover that 'I' have gone missing as well"
>
> (Butler, 2004a: pg 22)

This loss of self which Preciado felt from the inscrutable loss of Dustan does not follow the normative response to trauma (mourning and releasing the object of one's ego, only to reinvest it in another) where secure boundaries between self and other must be maintained. Preciado's body penetrated by testosterone, and Dustan's penetrated by drugs and dick, in their penetrated-porosity form a subject who "foil[s] what society wants to make of me" (Preciado, 2013: pg 16) so that many "of the things I thought impossible are possible" (Dustan, 2021: pg 93). In such a way, the impossibility of a productive melancholia becomes possible, animated not by language but by indelible connections that pass through and into bodies across time and spaces, made more (not less) possible through the action of drugs. This is not to say language is irrelevant to growing resistance and possibilities for ways of living more liveable lives, it is not. But to base our experiments for living on language practices alone, which have been so resolutely territorialised by ideologies which only ever want to isolate so as to produce a self-compliant subject, risks attempting to use the tools of the oppressor for liberation. Whilst linguistic-based strategies may have won reductions in violence against minorities, they have ultimately failed to help us rethink how collectivity can function to produce "joyful affects [which]… could bond the participants" (Hakim, 2018: pg 11) and help us to start building something "radically other" (Foucault, 1991: pg 121). All of this may sound like high theory (and to a degree it is), but what is being argued for is an understanding of connection beyond linguistic means, and therefore beyond the various disciplinary regimes described in this book. To explore this point, let us turn to the final participant in the book, Nathan.

## Nathan

Nathan was 28 when we first started talking. He is a second-generation Pakistani Muslim, from a middle-class background, and remains close to his family who live in Birmingham. He has been out as gay to them since he started university at 18 and found them generally supportive. Our interviews were always very informal, always accompanied by food and always started and finished with a hug. He had moved to Manchester after finishing university to start a career in biomedical sciences, arriving just before the big gay pride event that the city hosts in August. The first interview took place ten months later. In it, Nathan noted that he felt no sense of connection at the first Manchester Pride that he attended. Instead, he "*felt really, really horribly alone*". Speaking of the event that had taken place ten months earlier, he noted that "*they don't even call it Manchester Pride, they call it the Big Weekend. And it didn't feel in any way supportive*".

He also told me about how he used to attend chemsex parties. Some of them were "*condom parties*". Others were bareback events where he said that he usually took PrEP. When we completed our first interview in 2017, PrEP in Manchester was still relatively hard to get hold of. It was only available through the PrEP Impact Trial, which served to ration an effective medication (Dodds, 2021; Nagington & Sandset, 2020), providing only some (disproportionately

white and middle class) gay men registered on the Manchester list with access to PrEP. Moving from Birmingham to Manchester mid-trial meant that for people like Nathan, medication could be hard to obtain. Most of the times he was either having sex with condoms or on PrEP, but there were a few occasions where he recalled he "*was trying to be sensible, as sensible as I could be anyway"* in circumstances where a lack of political will had resulted in a failure to provide the resources to allow gay men to act responsibly (and remains the case for many communities). Because of this, there were some occasions which he could identify when he had not been using condoms or had not been able to access PrEP to use.

After recalling all this Nathan disclosed that he had become HIV-positive since moving to Manchester, likely around the time of Pride and that he hadn't "*done any more chemsex parties since*". He felt a sense of shame and failure about being HIV-positive, noting that whilst he was open about his sexuality with his parents, he felt unable to tell them about his HIV diagnosis because they would be concerned "*about how the world would look at me, how the world would consider me as a person, and stigmatise me*". Nathan recounted in the first interview how he was a good medical subject and "*took [his] meds every day… [never] missed one, had no blips [in viral load]*" and was *"undetectable*". Examining this in the context of the first two chapters of this book, it would be easy to suggest that Nathan offered a clear example of there being a syndemic of chemsex which was driving the HIV epidemic. His cessation of chemsex and integration into HIV care services could also be read as him being compliant with the requirement to become a healthy medical subject. However, he had not reached this point through any process of careful counselling, accompaniment, or care. Instead, it was clear during our first interview that he felt isolated and alone.

Over the course of our four interviews, however, he began to question the causality of his HIV diagnosis. Hitherto, he had never considered drugs to be a part of it:

> "*I'm just trying to think of causality of what makes people get HIV, and I'm just trying to think of what my causality was. I think the causality of it was depression… that I did not like myself and I did not like the life I was living*".

Much of the depression Nathan experienced was related to an extremely strenuous work-life balance. This, combined with the inaccessibility of well-evidenced HIV prevention mechanisms, highlights the complex sociopolitical factors contributing to HIV transmission. Focusing narrowly on a single object of moral panic, such as chemsex, fails to acknowledge the intricate web of causality involved.

Relatively soon after his diagnosis, Nathan joined various gay social groups such as those specialising in badminton and outdoor activities. Whilst on the face of it these might sound like appropriately healthy and sober communities to connect with, drugs (whilst not being central) were commonly used when socialising outside of the core activities such as matches and walks. In our second interview, he said that "*I've felt shame in the past and I sort of refuse to feel shame about*

*this [HIV] now… I'm trying to work through some of those issues now*". He noted how he had met two older friends in these groups who (much like Robert in the introduction to this book) had "*got a whole language developed around laughing at things, and smiling at things, and talking about things*". Underlying this language to laugh about the things people say and do on drugs, lay something closer to the alinguistic porosity and collectivity I have been arguing for. By our third interview, Nathan noted that his relationship with the new friends he had spoken of in his second interview:

> "*embody a lot of what other people are trying to find, which is a sense of connection via sex… what most of us have found within our community are buddies who we fuck because out of connection we find something other [that] sometimes words don't describe… sex provides that opportunity*".

The use of drugs helped Nathan realise a form of connection which sat outside the linguistic frameworks with which he had come to (shamefully) understand his body and the ways he related to other gay men. No longer was he a subject who had a sense of shame which disconnected him from other gay men. Sex and drugs, whilst initially abjected, had returned to produce a form of connection in which he found something of the other which connected him to them. In particular, he had found a way of embracing and holding on to the connections of bodies, which in turn effaced the discourses which had hitherto thrust disconnection onto him.

## Visceral solidarity and collective subjectivity

Chemsex makes clearer features of morality which hitherto may have been opaque. I term this key process visceral solidarity, not least because it offers new ways of thinking about our moral obligations to one another. It highlights the inescapable physicality of being with others and embraces the necessary experience of porosity that can unite subjects together through realisation of the inescapability (but frequently unacknowledged) experience of being penetrated by one another. Visceral solidarity, by creating indelible alinguistic looped connections, has the potential to allow a new collective subject to emerge – one that is not already territorialised by extant language frameworks. Preciado and Dustan as well as Jon Phelps and the other porn actors in *Slammed* highlight how such visceral connections can also stretch across time and spaces, using digital or analogue means. Our connected nature through the porosity which chemsex makes so obvious goes beyond the physical, and in doing so can challenge the "*oppressive nexus*" which Andrew so eloquently described.

Through taking chemsex as a case study in the morality of penetration and porosity, no longer when a disciplinary mechanism attempts to catch one in its gaze, need we feel a sense of isolation, or the need to flee into a labyrinth from its gaze. Instead, we may be reminded of the power of embracing our indelible collectivity

as a form of resistance to all that attempts to benefit from division and isolation. Once released from the power of an isolating gaze through recognition of our indelible collectivity, it becomes more, not less possible to locate the self and its potential for creativity. No longer may fear or shame prevent connection. Instead, the subject in their realisation of being connected to others is freed to play with (rather than be controlled by) the pleasure of boundaries which they gain (at least some) agency over.

As Butler (2015b: pg 15) notes, "bodily significations do not become successfully converted or sublimated into speech": this is the strength of visceral solidarity. The ontology of persistent promiscuous collectivity arises from the grain of the body and creates circuits of transmission between bodies. This form of connection is one which gay men and their sub-cultures readily understand and produce, but often find impossible to articulate as valuable because a language does not exist for it. As such, when gay men who engage in chemsex appear in the outside world, they are subjected to unrelenting disciplinary mechanisms. These mechanisms are used to measure, define, assess, diagnose, analyse, and produce discourse about (not with) them. The chemsexing gay man ultimately becomes isolated and can only be rightly situated within circuits of profit rather than pleasure. The possibility that chemsex may foster forms of solidarity and connectivity that exceed and subvert these extensive contemporary disciplinary measures incites a revealing panic. Yet, visceral solidarity, through its alinguistic loops, builds collective subjectivity away from the oppressive nexus of the contemporary discourses on chemsex that are produced by the extensive disciplinary mechanisms. Visceral solidarity subverts discourse and persists long enough to generate the unity needed to produce new ways of connecting and resistance to emerge and be recognised. The lack of recognition of visceral solidarity that emerges from its alinguistic nature is an (advantageous) unrecognisability, it subtends the existing disciplinary regimes that produce discourses on the way in which one must carefully and correctly curate the boundaries of one's body. Chemsex through its recognition of the subtle connections which persist between others reveals that we cannot help but always exchange pieces of the self with one another. It doesn't matter if we choose to identify ourselves in some sort of linguistic dyad for, against, or even with the other: visceral solidarity persists, even if we are told to efface it.

Yet, such unwilled and unwieldy connections may at first seem to leave one bounded to others in ways which closely parallel the way the chemsexing gay man becomes bounded by the wide-ranging disciplinary apparatuses outlined in earlier chapters of this book. One may justifiably ask how can a form of solidarity which leaves one so vulnerable to alterity, become a model for more capacious ways of living? At least in part this comes from finding new ways of recognising and embracing what it means to engage with, and be produced by, our experience of being vulnerable, and finding an enduring and increasingly liveable morality within this experience.

In *Frames of War*, and to a lesser extent in *Precarious Life*, Butler explores how the nature of being a human is inextricably tied to the boundaries that frame

some bodies as more worthy of protection than others. Butler's analysis of boundaries highlights how their production occurs through visual and textual means, with (much like the critique of Freud in chapter four) in ways that only make passing references to the aural aspects of existence. Yet, ultimately as she herself argues "to encounter the precariousness of another life, the senses have to be operative, which means that a struggle must be waged against those frames that seek to regulate affect in differential ways" (Butler, 2009: pg 52). The analysis presented in this book highlights how chemsex provides a particularly potent example of how bodies come into encounters with one another in relation to the aural senses, in ways that produce a collectivity which is not easily sublimated into language that so frequently attempts to control any sort of deviance and resistance.

The inability to sublimate visceral solidarity into language resists it from being disciplined. Chemsex demonstrates that instead of trying to escape power through a Foucauldian labyrinth, we should recognise and embrace the collectivity that arises from our penetrated porosity. This perspective allows for a critique of Butler's depiction of political protests, where bodies gather en masse to illustrate the broader political meaning of living together across differences in unchosen proximity (Butler, 2015a). Butler argues that such gatherings create an ethical demand to acknowledge the vulnerability of these bodies, yet this often gets lost in the uneasy alliances that form when language is required to articulate and advance the demands of the assembly. Chemsex points to a way of producing a moral recognition of one's vulnerability without becoming subjected to agreements and disagreements about the precise linguistic constructions of the body, its pleasures, and politics. The visceral solidarity so readily produced in chemsex highlights the more subtle ways in which we may be penetrated by the other and how the collectivity that emerges from this can subvert the oppressive nexus which aims to individualise and isolate. Chemsex through its promiscuous production of alinguistic loops allows visceral solidarity to be multiple and persistent. It leads us into a recognition of communal vulnerability, whilst resisting efforts to sublimate this into a language which so often results in division rather than a unity.

## The moral lessons of chemsex

In conclusion, chemsex has the potential to highlight novel ways of thinking about morality and the human condition. By embracing the porosity and collectivity inherent in chemsex, we can challenge the individualistic, isolating discourses that so often structure modern subjectivity. The visceral solidarity produced through the shared, penetrative experiences of chemsex points towards an ethics grounded in our inescapable interconnectedness. Rather than seeking to erect impermeable boundaries, or retreat into a "labyrinth" of disconnection, this perspective calls on us to recognise our vulnerability to, and implication in, one another. Chemsex teaches that we are fundamentally porous beings, constantly penetrated and transformed by our encounters with others. This alinguistic, bodily mode of connection subverts efforts to neatly define and control the

self through language and representation. By embracing such visceral solidarity, we gain the potential to imagine and enact more capacious, liveable ways of being. Far from a moral failing, chemsex's disruption of neoliberal individualism contains and develops the seeds of a new ethical paradigm, visceral solidarity: one that recognises and values our shared porosity and allows us to cultivate togetherness across difference. Chemsex, rather than being a place where morals aren't exactly a priority, is revealed through its promiscuous connections as a transformative site of political morality.

## Note

1 The LGBT Foundation is a national charity dating back to 1975, it is based in Manchester with a wide portfolio of services such as counselling, sexual health, and well-being services. It also engages in advocacy such as developing LGBT+ specific census questions and education for professionals in how to better meet the needs of LGBT+ people.

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# Index