

The gay scientist: Kane Race on the unexpected possibilities of experimental intimacies

Sexualities

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sex**Jamie Hakim** 

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Abstract

In this interview with Jamie Hakim, Kane Race talks about his most recent monograph *The Gay Science: Intimate Experiments With the Problem of HIV* (2018). In *The Gay Science*, he explores how practices of sex and intimacy between gay men are shifting amidst what he calls the changing infrastructures of gay life – digital, chemical and communal. As such the book is empirically oriented and looks at a wide range of topics from hook-up apps, to PreP to chemsex/party ‘n’ play, to the history and politics of Sydney’s Mardi Gras as they take place on the ground. Theoretically he blends the thought of philosophers such as Michel Foucault and Friedrich Nietzsche with critical perspectives such as actor-network theory and Science and Technology Studies to argue that as scholars of sexual practice we need to pay more attention to what emerges within the contingencies of the assemblages and infrastructures that make sex between gay men possible. In so doing, the book is far more optimistic about gay sex and digital media than either popular media or influential strands of queer theory, offering path-breaking insight into the major concerns of this special issue on Chemsex Cultures.

Keywords

Chemsex, digital media, gay culture, hook-up apps, sexuality

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Jamie Hakim: *The Gay Science* begins with your career as a researcher for the National Centre for HIV Social Research in Australia. Can you explain how this has informed your approach to researching HIV, sexual and digital cultures?

Kane Race: When I was 25 I took up a position at the National Centre in HIV Research (NCHSR) to conduct research into people's experiences of combination antiretroviral therapy. The centre ran a programme of empirical social scientific research into HIV risk practices, among other things, under the directorship of Susan Kippax – a feminist social psychologist to whom *The Gay Science* is dedicated.

Working at the centre opened my eyes to the world of empirical HIV research and its connection to HIV education, programming and policy. I came from a background in literary studies, philosophy and social semiotics and had virtually no experience of empirical research. What had attracted me to NCHSR was its focus on social and sexual *practices*, rather than individual psychologies, which resonated with what I had learnt from activist and critical literature on the sexual and social politics of HIV. Kippax and her team adopted an unapologetically 'social' approach to HIV behavioural research that differed substantially from the psychological individualism that characterizes the bulk of HIV research emanating from the USA. The focus on social, sexual and drug practices – and the meanings, contexts and relations in which these practices were embedded – made a real difference to how quantitative data were analysed and interpreted. Instead of attempting to produce personality scales that were predictive of risk practice, they produced scales of subcultural practices like sexual adventurism, for example. Instead of interpreting non-condom use as risk, plain and simple, they paid attention to the contexts in which condoms were being dispensed with. One of the most important effects of this approach, in my view, was that it framed those at risk as meaning-making agents, capable of innovation and of developing new strategies of HIV prevention.

This sort of approach was deeply formative not only for me, but a whole generation of Australian sex and drug researchers. It is one I try to build on in the book. Since I was a bit of a newcomer to policy-engaged empirical research at the time, I adopted something like an ethnographic relation to the knowledge practices of the field. I spent a lot of time thinking about questions such as: What are the ways that knowledge about HIV and risk practices are produced? Who participates in these processes of knowledge production, and under what arrangements? What sort of subjects do the disciplines that constitute HIV research anticipate and presume? What are the effects of this? To what capacities and perspectives on risk, safety, harm and pleasure do they variously give weight? Hence my focus in the book on the performativity of knowledge practices: *how* we grasp and act upon social and bodily problems matters.

I think what I appreciated most about the research ethic at NCHSR was the attitude it cultivated: to be prepared to be surprised by one's encounters in the research field – to take some pleasure in, or cultivate curiosity about, unexpected findings. This posture is, I think, intimately related to the recognition and fostering

of previously unrecognized forms of agency. And it is key for what I call in the book a gay science.

Jamie Hakim: I've long admired the way you write about gay men, sex and drugs – chemsex or p'n'p – it's been very helpful for my own research. One of the critiques my own work has received is that chemsex is not new and has long existed. Could you talk a bit about the continuities and divergences that the chemsex/p'n'p practices you write about in the book have with historical forms of sexualized drug taking amongst gay men?

Kane Race: It is true, of course, that people have long used intoxicating substances to enhance erotic and sexual experiences in a variety of different contexts. It would be pointless to deny that. But the term chemsex is typically used to refer to a very particular sexual setting and set of arrangements that came together at a particular moment in the history of urban gay communities to constitute a recognizable sexual scenario that involves particular drug practices. At minimum, the emergence of chemsex is indebted to the popularity of online hook-up devices (cruising apps and websites) as a widely accessed way of arranging sex between men, as well as the availability of stimulants such as crystal methamphetamine and GHB/GBL, which are used primarily to intensify and enhance the sexual experience in this context. These drugs have been used by gay men in different settings and for different purposes (such as clubs and dance parties and social gatherings among friends). And of course most subscribers use hook-up apps without using stimulants. But the conjunction of these devices and these drugs gives rise to situations in which new effects and experiences of each of them materialize. Their particular effects are co-constituted and co-produced in the course of their encounter.

The pleasures of stimulant-enhanced sex had become familiar to participants in the gay circuit and dance party scene of the 1980s and 1990s, mainly after the event, when people went home (or to sex venues or after-parties) to fuck. Certainly, this was happening well before the internet reconfigured the landscape of gay cruising. But the appearance of online hook-up devices in the early 2000s made it possible to bypass gay social and sexual venues altogether when arranging casual sex, and gave rise to new articulations of drug-enhanced 'partying' that were not organized around social venues or dancefloors. Indeed, at some stage, I'd say about 2010, it struck me that a whole new genre of sexual and social interaction, of partying on drugs had emerged in gay urban centres, that relied on smartphones and wifi, that took place largely in private residences, and that had its own set scripts, expectations and formal features that participants were used to using. It struck me as a distinctively new cultural formation predicated on a distinctive assemblage of settings, devices, desires, consumables and sexual repertoires.

I think what is important to notice about the emergence of chemsex, and its transformation of prior practices of gay cruising and partying, is its dependence on the coming together of a whole range of human and nonhuman actants (to borrow the terminology of actor-network theory) – a particular constellation of technologies, material settings, modes of consumption and sexual vernaculars. Not to

mention urban developments, the political and economic shaping of which you have teased out so well in your work (Hakim, 2019). In this coming together or constellation, all these elements can be understood to mediate each other in specific, more or less patterned ways, giving rise to particular experiences, practices, possibilities, effects, affective dynamics and attachments. It was difficult to describe what was new and remarkable about this set of activities without attending to the active role played by diverse objects, actants and practical repertoires in this process. This is why I have found actor-network theory so useful: for tracing the material-semiotic arrangements and characteristic associations that produce new sexual realities, specifically those that have come to be known and referred to and get concretized as chemsex.

Jamie Hakim: Having said this, how would you account for similar sorts of sexualized drug use amongst other social groups? I know that in the Australian context ‘crystal-sex’ (Hopwood et al., 2018) is practised by different cohorts of people who neither necessarily use hook-up applications nor are subject to the same shifts in urban gay culture that you talk about.

Kane Race: The term ‘chemsex’ is really a UK-based problematization of gay men’s drug and app use that gained professional traction in the context of associations with HIV risk-taking and HIV infection. As I discuss in the last chapter of *Pleasure Consuming Medicine* (2009), HIV agencies in the USA and Australia began to worry about gay men’s use of methamphetamine much earlier, in the early 2000s, before apps such as Grindr were even invented. Stimulant-enhanced sex is hardly a new phenomenon, but takes place in multiple settings and cultural milieus among many different kinds of people. And sex is not the only activity that people use drugs such as methamphetamine for; it has been used for studying, truck-driving, walking the street, dancing, socializing and house-cleaning! These practices are differently arranged in different cultural and historical settings, and they are freighted with different risks and pleasures and roles and expectations. If you type #spun or #tweaking into Tumblr, you will come across quite a different culture of eroticized methamphetamine use – one centred less around the preferences of urban gay men than USA-based heterosexuals and self-identified ‘tweakers’. One could isolate certain elements of this subculture – sexualized drug use, methamphetamine, the use of social media – and on this basis call it chemsex, but I think doing so does a certain violence to that scene or subculture’s own terms and vernacular.

Jamie Hakim: What do you think the greatest challenges are to contemporary research on gay men, sex and drugs?

Kane Race: I’m going to get Foucauldian here and say I think it depends on the will to knowledge that animates the research. As an editor of this special issue you know very well that most research on sex and drugs is motivated by concerns to reduce HIV infections; or reduce the risks of sexual practices and the harms of drug consumption; or to prevent ‘substance abuse’ ‘addiction’ and other disorders attributed to such behaviours. I guess a key challenge across these disciplines is producing accounts that proceed from the axiom that having homosexual sex and

consuming illicit drugs are intelligible, meaningful activities that take many forms; that the mere fact of engaging in such activities (whatever their risks) is not a basis for pathologizing people; thus the challenge becomes how to conceive and account for the emergence of risks and harms in a way that resonates with those who engage in these practices and helps them understand how to prevent or reduce those risks and harms if that's what they want. I have my own ideas about more or less promising approaches in this regard which I outline in the book. Since many psychomedical researchers presume homosexual sex and illicit drug consumption to be inherently dangerous activities, especially in the context of the HIV epidemic, a key question that tends to dominate such research, whether proceeding from a sociocultural or psychomedical perspective, is: 'Why do they do it?' But what a silly question! Lots of reasons! I think that kind of hand-wringing is misguided and leads ineluctably to pathologizing accounts.

Critical and cultural studies of queer sex and drug practices tend to be motivated by different concerns. Often they set out to identify practices of resistance to dominant social orders and reference these activities as evidence of such. And there is a danger here of reifying sex and drug practices as heroic acts of resistance to hegemonic orders on account of their deviant or illicit status and their transgression of social norms. This tends to totalize and overinflate the meanings of these practices by taking antinormativity as their overarching impulse. I have a problem with this. It trades in a form of overdetermination that seems to be quite happy to disregard the multiplicity of meanings and purposes such activities may have in practice when situated in the diverse contexts of their enactment. Studies of this sort have a thing or two to learn from the sociology of deviance – now considered terribly out of vogue. This tradition of interactionist sociology approached deviance as a social creation, a result of the power of some to label others. Deviance (transgression) is *not* an intrinsic quality of particular acts, but rather a consequence of social labelling (Becker, 1963). This is Howard Becker 101!

The breathless celebration of barebacking in some queer tracts plays fast and loose with the overdetermination of meanings and practices I have in mind here, even while invoking the concept of subculture to ascribe unity and coherence to the meanings it projects onto barebacking as practice. In the context of these habits of critical thought, it has seemed just as important to me to demonstrate the sense in which these practices (and the desire for them) are actually quite ordinary, and do not always involve some fixation with antinormativity or a political investment in deviance – or even register among participants as intentional activities.

Empirical and sociological studies, for their part, can often fall prey to another kind of overdetermination that fixes the meanings and practices of sex and drug consumption as though once and for all. We need to remember we are dealing with constantly evolving scenes of activities and practices whose possibilities and trajectories of development are unknown. How can we bring their virtualities to light? I think speculative methods are a helpful antidote to these concretizing and deterministic tendencies in some practices of empirical sociology (see Wilkie et al., 2017).

Jamie Hakim: The book is very empirically grounded, with arguments based on studies that explore what gay men do when they negotiate their sex lives on- and offline. As such, you provide quite a different interpretation of gay sexual cultures to the media, mainstream HIV research and even queer theory. Could you speak a little about the value of empirical work and how it has helped you understand gay men's sexual cultures?

Kane Race: One of the book's main arguments is that there are many ways of grasping the empirical, and how we grasp things matters for the realities we produce. So the book wrestles with the question of how empirical facts are produced, and how they might be produced otherwise. Many of its chapters take issue with some of the main ways in which gay men's sex and drug practices are problematized in the empirical health literature. In my analyses of the production of barebacking, the interpretation of risk behaviours and the problematization of chemsex, for example, I pay almost pedantic attention to how these subjects and practices are registered by, and enacted within, sociomedical practices, with a view to exposing some of the ungenerous assumptions that inform these efforts, and the opportunities they miss to realize gay men's agency when it comes to dealing with HIV prevention or reducing the dangers of drug use.

Jamie Hakim: In Chapter 6 of the book you use actor-network theory to give a very different account of personal responsibility especially in relation to HIV transmission. Can you explain what your understanding of personal responsibility is in this context?

Kane Race: This chapter queries the premium placed on predictability and linear causation by some of the major legal and medical institutions concerned with HIV prevention: the criminal law and the randomized control trial, both of which are involved in the attribution of responsibility and causation in relation to events of HIV transmission. Attributing responsibility is always a post-hoc exercise that has a series of performative effects, in the sense that it makes certain things or persons responsible and attempts to discipline their performance (to prevent future mishaps) while bracketing other circumstances and arrangements that might otherwise be implicated in the occasion.

I argue that the linear notion of individual responsibility and causation that these framing devices produce are inadequate for dealing with the present moment in HIV, given the ongoing and open impacts of biomedical prevention. Of course, we will always depend on notions of predictability and responsibility in order to proceed in the world and try to avoid unwanted events and accidents. But placing too much stock in linear causation and juridical responsibility may lead us to neglect the ways in which events such as HIV transmission are contingent outcomes of the collective activity of a diverse range of actors, both human and nonhuman, that might include technologies, devices, discourses, scientific practices, health care settings, sexual environments, etc. I argue we need to cultivate an ethic of responsive attentiveness to the unpredictable events that will inevitably emerge from the scene of technoscientific, juridical and bodily production we call the HIV epidemic. The answer is not more litigiousness, but an ethic of collective

responsibility for futures that are at once shared and indeterminable, i.e. impossible to fully predict.

Jamie Hakim: Given this critique of the ‘responsibilized subject’, often understood to be a key figure in neoliberal discourse, I wondered if you could expand on your critique of neoliberalism touched on in the book; or at least, the preoccupation that some scholars have with using neoliberalism as an explanatory framework for different aspects of contemporary gay culture?

Kane Race: In my first book, *Pleasure Consuming Medicine* (Race, 2009) I offer a much more sustained critique of neoliberalism by exploring the ideological investment in the figure of the illicit drug user. The illicit drug user is a particularly useful figure for the neoliberal state, I argue, because it allows the state to individualize responsibility for those forms of consumption it deems to be immoral by framing whatever misfortunes that subject experiences as a function of making the wrong choices in the domain of consumption: Just Say No and Just Do It are eminently neoliberal slogans, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick once observed (Sedgwick, 1994).

The Gay Science is not so much concerned with diagnosing the present conjuncture in political or economic terms, as attempting to tackle certain neoliberal tendencies, especially as these play out in the production of knowledge about sexual and risk practices, drug consumption, and the subject that is isolated by these determinations. As is well known, neoliberalism tends to posit a subject who is rational, autonomous, decisional and always in control of their circumstances, who makes their own choices and should bear responsibility for them irrespective of their social and material circumstances. It places an inordinate emphasis on the individual responsibility of human actors, presumed sovereign. Though critical scholars often misunderstand actor-network theory as apolitical because of its decision to pursue its analyses in modes other than debunking and critique, its account of agency as distributed among a diverse array of actors, technologies, settings and relations – as emerging, in other words, from the particular ways in which human and nonhuman entities come together and are arranged on specific occasions – should be considered a forceful rejoinder to neoliberal accounts of agency and the associated circumscription of the capacities and responsibilities of subjects.

When it comes to risk events in relation to sex and drug practice, the neoliberal investment in the intentional, pre-calculative subject promotes a misrecognition of the eventful and contingent nature of practice, such that we are encouraged to interpret as a matter of ‘intention’ circumstances and events that may in fact benefit from a more distributed consideration of the collective arrangements in which they take place. In other words, neoliberal models of the subject, agency and responsibility encourage a turning away from the contingencies of such events, when what could be promoted (and what I hope to promote in *The Gay Science*) is more generous attention to such relations and their contingencies and the various possibles they harbour.

Jamie Hakim: I wondered if you could explain what you mean by taking a speculative approach in your research and why it's been so useful for your understanding of hook-up apps?

Kane Race: For me this is about activating a sense of pleasure, play and experimentation with possibilities into the doing of social and cultural research. It is my way of trying to counter the highly deterministic perspectives that tend to characterize not only the health sciences, but mainstream studies of health and technology. It's about exploring the possibilities and unanticipated affordances of these devices in ways that may exceed their intended use or their designs. Speculation, play and experimentation are things that users of online hook-up devices engage in all the time. And also things that social and cultural researchers might be encouraged to bring to their research to bring certain virtualities and minoritarian, unexplored possibilities to light.

At face value, hook-up devices such as Grindr appeal to their users on the basis of their instrumentality: they help them achieve certain predetermined goals. But they also offer up a host of new possibilities for exchange with others and collective experimentation and play. I find these unanticipated or "off-label" uses much more interesting than anything offered in straightforwardly empirical accounts (see Race, 2015; and see Albury and Byron, 2016). For example, I've been interested in the ways that things like the screen cap function are involved in the emergence of new forms of sexual sociability among users of these devices and their friends. Capturing and storing digital images and chat has emerged as a gay cultural practice in its own right, and now operates as a means of collecting and sharing and even publicizing erotic information and memorabilia within friendship circles and sexual networks. Such records are put to various uses; a source of recollection, conversation, comparison, boasting, critique, vernacular learning, archiving, ammunition, collective debate and so on. The fact that these devices are giving rise to such forms of sexual sociability flies in the face of that familiar trope in modern social and political theory that sees the rise of the technical commodity as responsible for the demise of authentic community or sociability. I've found that attending to these side-practices sparks interest and imagination in ways that dry empirical descriptions of common themes and practices often fail to do, and I am interested in what can be done and what we can make when we go with that. This is what a gay science is all about: opening things up.

Jamie Hakim: I thought it might be good to end the interview speaking about how optimistic your work is, when influential strands of queer theory celebrate negativity, and so much popular media, especially the gay press (at least in the UK) are so pessimistic about the internet's effect on gay sex, and just gay sex generally.

Kane Race: I finished *The Gay Science* in 2016 and must say I feel far less optimistic about almost everything these days. What a difference a few years can make! But I am hardly alone in this. We must do what we can. I will say that I find some of the insights of queer negativity and the antisocial thesis indispensable. Leo Bersani's (1987) essay "Is the rectum a grave?" was one of the first pieces of HIV cultural criticism I ever read and it blew my mind. I am still wrestling

with it three decades later! And I share Lee Edelman's suspicion of the reproductive futurity of programmatic futures 'for the children' (Edelman, 2004). I am suspicious of attempts to offer a linear or predetermined programme of political action, including utopian fantasies of happiness or the good life, which are bound to have normalizing or disciplinary effects and are typically associated with liberal democratic and capitalist ends.

At the same time, as mentioned earlier I am suspicious of the investment in antinormativity we see in some versions of queer theory: the tendency to diagnose practices as either hegemonic or subversive, and in which certain non-normative practices (such as barebacking) get reified as paradigmatic figures of heroic resistance. An alternative approach would aim to affirm a range of 'experiments in living' and defend such experiments against their pre-emptive categorization as licit or illicit, healthy or deviant, by examining their multiplicity and subjecting the terms of their categorization to questioning.

In this respect my thinking is more in line with theorists such as Lauren Berlant and Sara Ahmed who argue we must imagine how we might reconstitute the present by examining the events of ordinary life. We need to find a way of embracing or affirming what happens, and work towards a world in which things happen in alternative ways, as Ahmed puts it. Perhaps my suspicion of programmatic political visions is just as indebted to Foucault, who expressed concern about how such programmes close down possibilities of experimentation with the terms of everyday life, the socio-political and cultural terrain that shapes and conditions living and the possibilities of life.

If *The Gay Science* seems optimistic, this is not because it has any particularly utopian or predetermined idea of the future in mind, but because it is committed to opening things out and resisting the predeterminations produced through disciplinary discourses and practices. One of my central aims is to counter the obsession with prediction, probability and predictability that informs so many social technologies today; from hook-up apps (which presume that you can always know in advance what you want from a sexual encounter) to scientific models that aim to identify and attribute risk to concrete practices, as though once and for all.

Whether optimistic or not, *The Gay Science* is committed to pleasure, to which I give a particular (technical) definition taken from Foucault as 'ultimately as nothing other than an event'. Events, minimally defined, are creators of a difference between a before and an after, and an eventful approach, like the one I adopt in the book, cares for the present as a space and time of unpredictable and unexpected possibilities. *The Gay Science* hopes to engender more active forms of attention to the way things come together in particular circumstances, their contingencies, and the differences these might make to worlds and lives; and it tries to realize the creative/unanticipated possibilities that inhere in present complexities. After all, in 'the unanticipated' we encounter not merely risk and danger, negatively framed: it's also the source of some of our most material and transformative pleasures.

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