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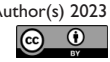

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Narcofeminism and its multiples: From activism to everyday minoritarian worldbuilding

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Abstract

Sociology has a long-standing interest in the consumption of licit and illicit drugs, particularly as a feminist concern with scholars highlighting the ways in which drugs are used as regulatory technologies to control the conduct and subjectivities of women and other marginalised groups. This monograph flips the focus from a feminist sociological *concern* with drugs as a means of confining minoritised peoples, to explore what they can do as a feminist *practice*. Employing the drug-user activist concept of 'narcofeminism', it aims to rethink how drugs are conceived in sociology and chart their role in shaping selves and worlds. This article introduces the guiding philosophy of the narcofeminist movement as articulated in an interview we conducted with founding narcofeminist activists from Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Threaded through the interview are vivid examples of the ingrained and overlapping hostilities that differentially constitute drug consumption practices for women and gender minorities, and the brave acts of resistance they perform in response. In introducing the collection, we foreground a key aim that has guided its development: thinking with the insights of narcofeminism, we have sought to address the complexities of drug use and to hold in focus its potentialities both in terms of its harms and benefits, risks and rewards and, importantly, to reflect on how people navigate these counterposing forces in their situated practices of drug use. We also discuss how the collection advances the sociology of drugs by bridging disciplinary divides and disrupting binary distinctions

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between licit and illicit drugs, volition and compulsion, pleasure and pain, and discourse and practice, among others. This article provides an overview of the contributions that comprise the monograph, highlighting how they grapple with the ethico-political commitments of narcofeminism to rethink drug consumption as a mode of living, capable of transforming social worlds.

Keywords
drug user activism, feminisms, marginalised groups, minoritarian practices, narcofeminism, sociology of drugs

> Have you seen the women who say calmly and with dignity: 'I use psychoactive substances and it helps me live and create'?
>
> Narcofeminist movement, Eurasian Harm Reduction Association (EHRA)

Narcofeminism: Living and responding at the margins

The term 'narcofeminism' was coined in 2018 by an international group of women and gender diverse people who use drugs at a meeting initiated by the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) in Berlin (EHRA, 2019a). The movement centres on the recognition that the issues confronting women[1] who use drugs are feminist issues. As narcofeminist and contributor to this collection, Judy Chang explains:

> Due to criminalization, punitive policies and stigma and discrimination, women who use drugs are two to five times more likely to experience gender-based violence and intimate partner violence compared with women who don't use drugs . . . Our sexual and reproductive health rights are suspended, where we are at times subject to forced abortion and sterilization, routinely denied child custody rights, turned away from health services and treated as second-class citizens. Harsh drug laws coupled with patriarchal norms and assumptions have led to the mass incarceration of women who inject and use drugs. In many parts of the world, women who use drugs are more likely than men to be incarcerated for the same offence or face harsher sentencing laws. Due to the double, sometimes triple, stigma faced by women who use drugs, the rights violators are not held accountable. With all of this in mind, it is troubling that empathetic links of solidarity have not been extended by many mainstream feminists to women who use drugs. (Chang, 2019, paras 6–7)

In response to their exclusion from mainstream feminist agendas, a group of feminist drug activists from Eastern Europe and Central Asia formed the narcofeminist movement: a collective for women who use drugs to mobilise, fight for their right to self-determination and to have their voices heard (Chang, 2019). Narcofeminism combines a feminist and human rights agenda to push for more humane drug policy, harm reduction and decriminalisation. It champions the 'right to use drugs and experience pleasure', 'reclaim our bodily sovereignty' and 'live in safety and freedom' (EHRA, 2019a). As an ethico-political project, narcofeminism works to build 'a world free of stigma, violence and oppression' (EHRA, 2017).

We use the concept of narcofeminism here because of the valuable work it does in bringing together the use of drugs with the politics of feminism, in one word, one praxis. We were very fortunate to have the opportunity to interview some of the founding narcofeminists and given the centrality of narcofeminism as an organising concept and provocation for this special issue, it seemed fitting to give the first word to narcofeminist activists working on the frontline to advocate for women who use drugs. For this reason, we open the collection with the narcofeminist interview titled 'Living and responding at the margins', featuring five women based in Lithuania, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan who are active in the narcofeminist movement. In describing the origins of narcofeminism, they explain that they needed a term that could conjoin two seemingly unrelated practices – drug consumption and feminism – and the activism required for both. Although drug use and gendered forms of oppression are intimately entangled in the lives of these women, they found themselves having to separate the two as feminist organisations often saw illicit drug use as a reason to refuse help, while some harm reduction organisations refused to acknowledge the specific impact of repressive drug policies on women and gender minorities:

> I remember when women inside the drug user movement started to speak about specific women's issues and this was not understood by the men in this community, like, 'Why do you need some specific services?! What is so special about you? Because we're all stigmatised. Why do you need special attention?' So even inside this movement it's also not accepted. And also, I guess inside the women's movement . . . the issues of women who use drugs among the feminist movement are not discussed. (Maria Plotko, Bessonova et al., this volume)

> There's actually a lot of hate from women in the activist community. We were preparing information and pamphlets about sex workers and various other issues, and we wanted to include information about narcofeminism, but I got so much hate from these women in the Coalition to Prevent Violence Against Women (CEVAW), and that was very, very hard to deal with . . . What attracted me to narcofeminism is its appeal to intersectionality and it allowed me to accept all kinds of different women and all their diversity . . . I have experienced organisations of sex workers who don't accept women who use drugs, organisations of women who use drugs . . . who won't accept sex workers. Or LGBTQ communities who will not accept a lesbian who uses drugs. And for me narcofeminism was this island that accepts all women. (Alla Bessonova, Bessonova et al., this volume)

As drug-using women in countries governed by repressive drug policies, they describe how they routinely experience harsh forms of surveillance and punishment. When they dare to speak out, they are subjected to harassment and abuse. For example in our conversation, one of the narcofeminists tells us how when one of her drug activist speeches was put online, 'The people renting [my flat to me] asked me to vacate it because I was speaking to defend the rights of women to use drugs'. Similarly Alla Bessonova describes how she experienced harassment 'because [she] was a representative of this [narcofeminist] movement in Kyrgyzstan'. As she explains, 'There was an article published about me and then there was kind of public shaming. Neighbours and people working in my child's daycare were calling me out. There were threats from law enforcement.'

While the practices of narcofeminism predate the coining of the term itself, its naming has helped to highlight the disproportionate impact of the war on drugs on women and gender nonconforming people. As a feminist movement, it is predicated on an understanding of the 'overlapping systems of oppression and discrimination women face, based not just on gender and sex, but on race and ethnicity, sexuality, economic background and . . . other axes, including drug use' (Chang, 2019, para 9). In our conversation, one of the narcofeminists characterises these conjoining stigmas and forms of discrimination as 'concentration points': 'it all kind of concentrates and becomes starker at those points where that concentration happens'. Yet the entanglement of gendered forms of oppression with drug-related oppression has sometimes been overlooked in the academic literature, with feminist scholar Nancy Campbell noting how drug-using women have been widely depicted as 'failures of democracy, femininity and maternity' (2000, p. 16).

Our discussion with the narcofeminist activists alerts us to the ways in which the oppression and stigma that drug-using women face are imbricated in the massive disparities in drug policy approaches, treatment provision and social support in different geographic contexts. For example, in Western Europe, Australia and the United States where most of the contributors in this collection are based, drug policy reform is on the agenda and treatment and harm reduction measures are in place (to varying degrees across these jurisdictions). This is not to suggest that illicit drug use is normalised in these contexts; it still attracts widespread social opprobrium but for the most part, it is treated as a health issue for which healthcare and treatment are available, though often delivered via punitive, disciplinary practices (e.g. supervised daily dosing of opioid substitution treatment, urine testing, abstinence-based detox programmes). By contrast, in many parts of the world including Eastern Europe and Central Asia where the narcofeminist movement originated, formal treatment and social support is considerably more difficult to access, if it is available at all. Crucially services tailored to the specific needs of women are conspicuously absent in these jurisdictions:

> We don't have statistics about women who use drugs, the statistics are non-existent . . . so it's hard to advocate for services for women because of that. No one pays attention to this issue. And you see this with the doctors and services that are designed to help women, like maternity, they don't know anything about drug use. Women who use drugs are very stigmatised in these places and can't have proper care. The doctors that provide ob-gyn [obstetrics and gynaecology] services don't know about drugs and the people who know about drugs don't know about women's issues. They don't work together so it's all a mess. (Maria Plotko, Bessonova et al., this volume)

Our interview with the narcofeminist activists was conducted several months before the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In Putin's invasion speech he characterises Ukrainains as 'neo-Nazis and drug addicts' (Putin cited in Roth, 2022). Much has been made of the reference to 'neo-Nazis', particularly as the Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy identifies as Jewish, but the reference to 'drug addicts' has not been subject to the same degree of scrutiny. This goes to the very heart of what the narcofeminists were at pains to stress in our interview – just how vilified they are, and the ways in which the figure of the addict is

mobilised as a tool of governance in their region. The drug addict is perceived as evil and, in this respect, arguably made akin to a Nazi. It is in this context that Olga Byelyayeva explains, 'we just started talking about these issues in such an oppressive environment'. She goes on to highlight the importance of these small acts of solidarity and resistance in a context of profound hostility: 'We don't put these hefty goals in front of ourselves to get this done because it's frankly just not safe'. We hope this interview will introduce readers to the narcofeminist movement and situate the other contributions to the collection in these everyday practices of resistance and minoritarian acts of worldbuilding.

Our cover image for the collection was produced by narcofeminist artist Jamie Harary whose artwork seeks to 'reduce the stigma of drug use, dispel myths and promote safer drug consumption, and center the fact that drug user rights are human rights' (Next Distro, 2023). Inspired by her previous work, which was first introduced to us by Nancy Campbell (see Campbell's essay in this volume for more detail), we commissioned Jamie to produce the cover image and gratefully acknowledge her contribution to the collection and to the broader project of narcofeminist harm reduction. Through her delicate, yet dramatic images, Jamie's art presents an empowering vision of women's drug use highlighting the agency, creativity and care it enacts. For us the cover image is a kind of palimpsest: at a surface level, the poppies in various stages of bloom evoke opioids (and thus drugs), speaking to a central focus of the collection. Beyond the surface, the image contains other semantic traces with the poppies in bud suggesting new life, growth and transformation. They also suggest beauty and care, an evocation that disrupts commonplace tropes and imagery of drug use, e.g. desaturated pictures of used syringes and sad, ravaged faces intended to evoke suffering and misery. Of course, poppies are also a symbol of remembrance for those who have lost their lives in wars and conflicts. While usually used to commemorate the lives of soldiers involved in the World Wars and major conflicts, it seems fitting that in the context of this collection, the poppies invite a more inclusive spirit of remembrance, one that encompasses those who are often forgotten or erased by history. Here our use of poppies in the cover image is intended to honour and remember those who have lost their lives in the 'War on People who use Drugs' (Zigon, 2019): people whose lives have been treated as expendable and who have died as a result of overdose, police violence, institutional stigma or neglect. In line with this commemorative symbolism, the poppies also gesture to our hope for a more peaceful, just future for people who use drugs. This is a disarticulation of the poppy away from its capture as a symbol of patriotic self-sacrifice back towards its original resonance as a symbol of the destruction of war and the hope for a future free of it. It is these multiple layers of meaning and the ways in which they disrupt dominant negative stereotypes of drug use that drew us to this image – in its expansiveness and palimpsest-like quality, the cover image speaks to our title and aim of revisioning drug use outside the terms and limits of dominant imaginaries.

This aim and the concerns of the collection as a whole are elaborated in **Judy Chang's** powerful account of living a narcofeminist life. She attunes us to 'what it is like to live with the compounded effects of gendered injustice, drug prohibition, racism and Otherism, but have little recourse to voice that injustice'. Through the practice of autoethnography she 'speaks back' to these forms of silencing and oppression to relay the complexities of her life with drugs and most strikingly the forces that seek to curtail it.

She also challenges dominant accounts that equate drug use with loss of agency and volition, clarifying that '[c]ontrary to mainstream narratives, I was not a passive victim of drug use'. For Chang, in her embodied activism as a narcofeminist, '[o]pening up to more radical and complex ideas and understandings of drug use, as well as drug-using subjectivities, is a first step towards less limiting, more appropriate drug policies and practices that enable fully-lived lives'. This paradigm shift involves resisting 'service modalities and delivery systems that are disempowering, controlling and paternalistic' as well as those that are outright 'treatment as punishment'. In one particularly disturbing example, Chang recounts the death of a fellow resident in a residential treatment facility where the 'logic of drug treatment was literally premised on the belief that abstinence was worth more than a human life'. As she explains, narcofeminism is about 'wresting interpretations of drug use away from the patriarchal, masculinist discourses of [prohibition and criminality] and the pathologising discourses of medicine' where a life with drugs is seen as no life at all. Narcofeminism puts a name to embodied, ethico-political acts of care to make these lives matter, invoking a 'capacity for cooperation that drug use does not erase but stimulates and consolidates'. (Chang, this volume)

In assembling these insights alongside the contributions of researchers from a range of disciplines including sociology, cultural studies, gender and sexuality studies, and science and technology studies, the articles included in this collection exemplify different ways in which narcofeminisms can be taken up to forge a more inclusive, 'caring' sociology of drugs. However, the collection is by no means a comprehensive account of narcofeminisms and nor should it be read as prescription of what may follow from them. Rather, like the narcofeminist concept that inspired it, the collection is an inevitably partial, but polyphonous attempt to generate new insights into the feminist politics of drug use. In doing so, we have sought to put these insights into dialogue with sociology and our sister disciplines to elaborate a sociology of drugs that is attuned to the ways in which specific forms of drug consumption – mostly 'illicit' – are both shaped by and active in shaping existing systems of oppression, while also registering their possibilities as sites of feminist resistance to dominant regimes. Perhaps in some small way the collection will help to shine a light on the important work of the narcofeminist movement and we hope that readers inspired by this work will support the cause of these organisations however they can.

'Undisciplining' the sociology of drugs

While the sociology of drugs has its roots in rich accounts of human–drug relations as told by the likes of Howard Becker (1953) in *Becoming a Marihuana User* and Jock Young (1971) in *The Drugtakers: The Social Meaning of Drug Use*, over the course of the 1990s something interesting happened. As we entered a 'rave new world' (Phaphides, 1997) with the arrival of synthetically-made club drugs, drugs entered the mainstream and are said, by some, to have become 'normalised'. Parker, Aldridge and Measham conducted a landmark study of this new drug scene in Manchester, UK which provided the foundation for their influential 'normalisation thesis'. They argued that drug consumption had become 'an unremarkable feature of life for some young people in their pursuit of leisure and pleasure' and 'socially and culturally accepted by many members

of the non-drug using population' (Pennay & Measham, 2016, p. 187). But at the same time in the UK as well as in other parts of the world, something else was happening. Heroin was no longer confined to the close-knit circles of the hippy bourgeoisie and was increasingly consumed in poorer areas affected by deindustrialisation. As HIV reached epidemic proportions, its spread through injecting drug use involving heroin became a public health concern (Berridge, 2002). Over the course of the 1990s then, two divergent research paths emerged in the sociology of drugs as heroin became associated with injecting drug use, addiction and HIV, and ecstasy with dancefloors, recreation and pleasure. Both areas of study grew, but, did so by cementing divides between recreational drug use and addiction: volition and compulsion, normality and pathology, pleasure and pain. Confined by such binary oppositions, these different foci have produced a series of onto-epistemological divides that have riven the sociology of drugs.

This collection seeks to disrupt these divides by combining insights from the narcofeminist movement with transdisciplinary research that is often gathered under the umbrella of critical drug studies (e.g. Dennis, 2019; Duff, 2017; Fraser & Moore, 2011; Malins, 2017). In assembling the contributions for the collection we have drawn inspiration from *The Sociological Review's Manifesto* and 2018 Conference 'Undiscipling: Conversations', in particular the recognition that:

> to renew the critical and creative appeal of sociology, we need to be responsive to what can be opened up, conceptually as much as practically . . . about what could be thought differently, and how that creates more possibilities for what could and should be done next, both in the academy and outside of it.

In an effort to cultivate this mode of thinking differently and the epistemological openness it encourages, we invited a diverse range of contributors, including narcofeminist activists, people with lived experience of illicit drug use and international scholars from different disciplines. While this list is neither exhaustive nor as diverse as the field from which it draws, we see it as a starting point for engaging a polyphony of perspectives on narcofeminism and the onto-ethical possibilities it invites.

In a spirit of feminist collaboration, we built in opportunities for exchanging ideas and developing the collection in dialogue with contributors. This included an online workshop held in December 2021 where we shared our vision for the collection and invited contributors to discuss their ideas and work in progress. During this meeting, contributors also suggested a system for closer dialogue where they were paired with another author to comment on each other's draft papers. In contrast to the neoliberal academic emphasis on competition and critique, this form of collegial engagement and solidarity resonates with Núñez Casal's (2021) account of how 'critical friendships' are formed through the process of 'becoming available', putting at risk what we know and engaging in a spirit of intellectual generosity. Taking up Jade Vu Henry and colleagues' call, 'we wish to advocate vigorously for new critical friendships across academia [and outside of it] which might care-fully choreograph our "explanatory diagnostics" of power with the alternative, more "anticipatory-utopian" moments in critical thought' (2021, p. 7). It is through this collaborative openness to exchanging ideas that we forge our aim to

contribute both to more generous modes of scholarship and, in keeping with our narcofeminist focus, to hold open possibilities for living well with drugs.

Sociology has a long-standing interest in licit and illicit drug use, including as a feminist concern with scholars highlighting how drugs are used as regulatory technologies to control the conduct of women and other marginalised groups (e.g. Campbell & Ettorre, 2011; Hartley & Tiefer, 2003; Keane, 2017). This collection flips the focus from a feminist sociological concern with drugs as a means of confining minoritised peoples, to explore what drugs can do as a feminist practice. Employing the drug-user activist concept of narcofeminism, it rethinks how drugs are conceived in sociology and charts their role in shaping selves and worlds.

In the epigraph, the narcofeminist activist movement invites attention to the creative, life-affirming qualities of drug use that are all too easily erased by dominant approaches centred on a reductive emphasis on harm and pathology. This defining provocation of narcofeminism explores the political potential of drug use as a challenge for new modes of thought. Inspired by the explicit connection between drugs and activism, we elaborate on the concept of narcofeminisms suggesting that it poses radical new possibilities for conceiving drug use as a mode of living and, thus, in a unique manner capable of forging alternative kinds of social relations to those resulting from punitive modes of governance. Although we are all too aware that illicit drug use takes place in a gruesome context of international profiteering and human exploitation, in contrast to more usual foci on suffering and struggles we have elected to pursue a minoritarian approach. This requires an appreciation of the complexities of drug use and the problematic ways in which prohibitionist drug policy regimes have been shown to feed international trade circuits (McCoy, 2004; Mosher & Akins, 2020; Thornton, 2014). In contrast to the dominant enactment of drug use as morally suspect and intrinsically harmful, particularly for minoritised peoples, this monograph departs from the prevalent emphasis on drug-related harms.

The violence of prohibitionist drug policy proceeds from the assumption that illicit drugs have inherent causal properties. However, as our contributors dramatise in numerous ways, drug consumption opens to vastly different situations. While there can be no denying the ingrained hostilities that differentially constitute drug consumption practices (Miller & Carbone-Lopez, 2015; Muehlmann, 2018) and which are not restricted to the legally outlawed 'illicit' (see Keane, this volume), the project of narcofeminism requires a careful attention to the counterposing forces in the situated practices of drug consumption. One way of approaching this is to consider what might be described as the emancipatory potential of drug consumption while, at the same time, inviting reflection on what freedom and emancipation mean. Instead of treating drugs as singularly oppressive technologies, to be emancipated from, we can ask what possibilities are cultivated *with* drugs? How, as they marry with the vast scope of what is often reduced to the generalised binaries of safe/dangerous and pain/pleasure, might they partake in a future different to that which decides their condemnation?

These are different kinds of questions to those more usually posed in the sociology of drugs literature, which tends to focus on how people 'do drugs' and the effects that particular drugs produce in specific sociocultural settings. Importantly, where gender is mentioned in these accounts it is often in order to compare how ciswomen and cismen

consume and experience drugs differently. For example, as discussed above in the first study of UK dance clubs following the explosion of ecstasy (Measham et al., 1998), Measham (2002) explores how young women 'do gender' through 'doing drugs'. She highlights how they exploit the empathic and stimulating properties of drugs to become more sociable, inhabit a 'club babe femininity' and control and lose weight to fit an ideal feminine body type. In another important early study of women's drug use, Maher (1997) highlights how women who consume heroin and freebase cocaine ('crack') in New York City are institutionally excluded from supply chains in the same way as women are excluded from managerial roles in wider society. In this sense, drug worlds map onto broader gender inequalities. While studies like these have integrated questions of gender into wider discussions on drugs, particularly in acknowledging and addressing the 'special needs' of drug-using women (Boyd, 2001, 2017; Campbell & Ettorre, 2011; Campbell & Herzberg, 2017; Ettorre, 2004), they also point to some of the ways that binary logics have limited or 'disciplined' conversations in the sociology of drugs by treating gender as categorisable and preassigned, and drugs as fixed, stable objects that work to reinforce pre-existing gender roles and expectations.

Resisting the binary logic of gender difference on which such comparative work relies, we understand gender, following feminist theorist Judith Butler, as iteratively and multiply produced 'through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time' (1990, p. 274). On this view, gender is fluid and not confined to a male/female binary. Importantly for our purposes, this approach invites attention to the ways in which gender is transformed through everyday practices, including those associated with drug consumption. This monograph explores how gender and drugs shape each other across a range of settings including in relation to narcofeminist activist artwork (Campbell, this volume), women's experimental use of psychedelics (Dymock, this volume), queer drug use (Florêncio; Azbel, this volume), women's drinking in domestic contexts (Keane, this volume) and drug policing and treatment (Race; Dennis & Pienaar, this volume). As Chang puts it, we are open to many 'complex subjectivities that the intersections of drug use and gender enact' (Chang, this volume).

Another way that the approach taken in this collection differs from classic studies of drug use and seeks to expand discussions beyond binary logics is by thinking about drugs as performative agents, capable of effecting change. It is apparent that agency is not the sole prerogative of human subjects but is distributed across the human and more-than-human spectrum. In this collection we draw on feminist science studies and critical drug studies to explore the generative role of drugs in relation to gender, asking: what new ways of knowing and doing gender do drugs afford? This poses a challenge to the dominant view in the sociology of drugs that the meanings and effects of drugs are relationally produced, emerging within, and inseparable from, the context in which they are consumed – the drug, set and setting as conceptualised in Zinberg's (1984) classic text *Drug, Set, and Setting: The Basis for Controlled Intoxicant Use*. While contributing important insights into the situatedness and contingency of drug effects, this approach tends to overlook the agency of drugs themselves in the materialisation of experience. More recent work applies insights from feminist frameworks and science and technology studies to approach drugs as lively 'social and political agents' (Fraser et al., 2009, p. 124; see also Duff, 2013; Race, 2014). In their edited collection in *Science as Culture* on

'Living drugs', Fraser, valentine and Roberts argue for social scientists to treat drugs as both agents and analytical objects worthy of interrogation: 'as social scientists we cannot afford to leave this field to the scientists and clinicians, or to simply join the wait for "better" drugs' (2009, p. 124). In another notable edited collection on the 'Social life of drugs' in the *International Journal of Drug Policy*, Duff (2013) draws on Actor Network Theory to establish critical alcohol and other drug research as animated by a concern for 'things in the making':

> Dispensing with the discrimination of humans and nonhumans (subjects and objects, nature and culture) through the use of novel conceptual and empirical tools enables researchers and practitioners alike to become more sensitive to the entities involved in the generation of action in particular settings, at particular times. (p. 168)

Building on these insights, contributors to this volume pay close attention to the generative potential of drugs to transform social connections, and ways of being and knowing. This is a rather different orientation to that of neuroscientific and psychological accounts which insist on the malign agency of drugs by emphasising their capacity to produce harm, change the brain's structure and chemistry (e.g. addiction as a brain disease) and derail lives. In assigning deterministic power to drugs and the brain, such approaches reinforce a form of material determinism which minimises human agency (Fraser et al., 2018; Netherland, 2012). In doing so, they tend to overdetermine the harms of drugs, and reinstate Cartesian dichotomies of body/mind, biological/social and natural/chemical. By contrast, in this monograph we are interested in rethinking the agency of drugs outside these dichotomies and charting the contingent, fluid relations of drug use, subjectivity and the body. Our aim is to move beyond simplistic accounts that centre either the dangers or pleasures of drugs, and explore instead the tensions between the two, and the constellation of forces that shape the materiality of drug consumption. Thinking with the insights of narcofeminism, we pay special attention to the politics of gender, race, class and other axes of difference in materialising drug consumption in relation to marginalisation, the violence of prohibitionist drug laws and social inequalities. In presenting the monograph we have contextualised the contributions according to three distinct but overlapping sections, outlined below.

Drugs and gender: Technologies of oppression and resistance

In the first essay in this section, **Fay Dennis** and **Kiran Pienaar**, draw on the work of feminist historian Saidiya Hartman to interpret one woman's (Kim) story of heavy drug use and her reluctance to 'recover' as an act of resistance: a refusal to participate in the legal and treatment infrastructures that seek to constrain her life choices. Against dominant depictions of her life as an 'addict' and 'criminal', Dennis and Pienaar consider the inventive ways Kim presents her life *with* drugs as involving insurgent acts of resistance against the oppressive regimes of prohibitionist drug policy and addiction treatment. In taking inspiration from Hartman, the authors note that they are not seeking to dismiss Kim's struggles or romanticise her drug use, but rather to assemble a fuller picture of her

life that captures its complex admixture of daily trials and challenges, fleeting triumphs, pleasures and quotidian acts of resistance. This aim resonates with that of the collection as a whole: while recognising that drug use can entail struggles and suffering, the contributions to this monograph seek to situate such experiences in relation to the politics of prohibition as it intersects with gender, sexuality, race, class and social inequality. We hope that readers with lived experience of illicit drug use will find these richly textured, nuanced accounts – and the tensions they embody – chime with their own experiences or offer new insights into the diverse ways in which drug use and its effects materialise.

In the second piece in this section, **Helen Keane** follows the figure of the 'drinking at home woman' in relation to the COVID-19 lockdowns in Australia. Through her careful analysis of news media accounts, she draws attention to the ways in which the woman who drinks at home is depicted as a feminised problem subject. This figuration, she argues, connects to broader problematisations of alcohol as both intrinsically harmful and consumed in response to social harms. In these media accounts the 'drinking at home woman' is not only depicted as a kind of feminised problem subject, but is mobilised as evidence of the harms of moderate drinking in general. Drawing on a minoritarian narcofeminist politics, Keane asks what can be learnt from approaching 'mild intoxication represented by a glass of wine as a resource which can help bring leisure and freedom into a time and space of unending and diffuse work and responsibility'. She argues for rethinking women's drinking-at-home practices outside the frame of harm as 'small and mundane measures of resistance'.

Continuing with this theme of resistance, **Alex Dymock** speaks directly to the problems faced by the narcofeminist movement who find themselves outside both male-dominated drug-using activism and feminist organising. Reimagining these seemingly incompatible categories of drug use and feminism, Dymock proposes 'acid feminism' as a way of exploring the consciousness-raising potential of psychedelics that can both rework 'masculinist knowledges' at the heart of psychedelic research and take seriously their potential for the wider feminist movement as a mode of feminist 'grass roots knowledge production' (citing Firth & Robinson, 2016, p. 355). Through autobiographical accounts of women's psychedelic substance use, she explores how psychedelics may act as an 'experimental, political tool'. This theme is echoed across this section with contributors exploring how drugs are enfolded into dominant forms of governance while also holding in focus their potential to shape alternative futures.

Where the previous contributions in this section address some of the subtle, yet insidious forms through which women and gender minorities are governed through particular problematisations of alcohol and other drug use, **Kane Race** provides a stark example of the control and 'abjectification' of minoritarian populations through strip-searching. Focusing on the escalating use of strip-searching in the state of New South Wales (NSW), Australia, and its connection with street-level drug policing including drug dog operations, he notes that these practices 'draw police ever more intently into the orbit of the sexual and sexual violation and in ever-closer proximity to the genital . . . cavities of those it forcibly produces as suspects'. While legal discourses rationalise these practices as technologies of detection that support drug policing and enforcement, Race argues that they are better understood as 'technologies of abjection'. Applying insights from feminist, queer and decolonial scholarship to a wide-ranging analysis of legal cases,

news media accounts, and film representations, Race traces the political, historical and social processes through which sexual humiliation and violence have become prominent mechanisms of drug policing in NSW, Australia. He suggests that these technologies of abjection are usefully understood as performative displays where the rhetoric of drug policing is used to justify the disproportionate subjection of marginalised groups (including Indigenous Australians, racial minorities and LGBTIQ+ people) to punitive, dehumanising forms of sovereign violence. This complex analysis highlights the violent logics of police power and resonates with a narcofeminist commitment to exposing the gendered, sexual, raced and classed dimensions of repressive drug policies.

Drugs and sexualities: Practices of care and connection

Having explored drug consumption as a form of resistance to dominant social orders, this section presents contributions that consider the work drugs can do in reimagining sexualities and sexual encounters. Contributors build on the work of critical drug scholars to conceive desire as a relational phenomenon produced in drug-using events where the potential for bodies to act, feel and think is both expanded and curtailed depending on their connection to any number of other bodies and phenomena (Duff, 2014; Malins, 2004, 2017). These complex dynamics have been variously explored in the literature to elaborate theories of consumption 'beyond the subject' (Duff, 2014) that centre instead assemblages (Duff, 2014; Malins, 2017), events and trajectories (Dilkes-Frayne, 2014; Dilkes-Frayne & Duff, 2017; Race, 2014, 2017), 'intra-actions' (Dilkes-Frayne et al., 2017; Fomiatti et al., 2022; Fraser, 2006) and relations (Dennis, 2017, 2019). Rather than a desiring subject choosing drugs, the contributors in this collection explore how desire and agency emerge through encounters with drugs. On this view, desire and agency are distributed phenomena, rather than capacities of a sovereign, choosing subject. This is what we refer to as the 'minoritarian potential of drugs', involved in new ways of becoming, outside of the 'majority' where

> [m]ajority implies a constant, of expression or content, serving as a standard measure by which to evaluate it. Let us suppose that the constant or standard is the average adult-white-heterosexual-European-male . . . It is obvious that 'man' holds the majority, even if he is less numerous than mosquitoes, children, women, blacks, peasants, homosexuals, etc. That is because he appears twice, once in the constant and again in the variable from which the constant is extracted. Majority assumes a state of power and domination . . . It assumes the standard measure, not the other way around. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 104)

Following Deleuze and Guattari (1987), a minoritarian politics attends to neglected phenomena, people and relations that give rise to new ways of becoming, not tethered to the 'standard measure' or unmarked category of the white heterosexual, European male. In elaborating the role of drugs in this minoritarian politics, we are reminded of a rather different example of minoritarian worldbuilding that shares a concern with disrupting dominant relations and elaborating a vision of care centred on connection and interdependency: feminist theorist Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's (2015, 2017, 2019) careful

analysis of human–soil relations and the role of soil in a multispecies world as a lively system, a 'concealed, yet vital "bioinfrastructure" that affects human relations and sustains life on earth' (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2019, p. 393). This reimagining of soil centres our 'earthy connectedness' and intimate entanglements with soil as living matter with intrinsic value beyond human use (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2019, p. 391). It proposes a system of maintenance and care rather than one driven by extractivist productivity and the agricultural value of soil. In calling for better modes of caring for this life-sustaining matter on which our very existence depends, Puig de la Bellacasa is interested not only in debunking the 'productionist subjection of soil' but also in 'troubling and reworking these dominant relations from within by transforming everyday soil care' (2017, p. 170). In this spirit of centring care and worldbuilding, this collection seeks to acknowledge the generative, affirmative qualities of drugs, and their potential to disrupt dominant social orders without losing sight of the dominant forces that seek to quash and territorialise them. 'Addiction' (Dennis & Pienaar), 'technologies of abjection' like strip-searching (Race), public health policies (Azbel), gender norms (Campbell) and media discourses (Keane) are all examples of territiorialising forces discussed in the pages of this collection.

Experiments in sexuality are key to some of the ways gender is performed and disrupted in relation to drugs. Sociological discourses on sex, sexuality and drugs have tended to be divided into a concern with heterosexual male virility (Törrönnen & Roumeliotis, 2014), on the one hand, or minoritarian harm, on the other. Where women appear in these discourses it is frequently in relation to their victimisation as survival sex workers (e.g. Maher, 1997; Sanders, 2004; Sterk, 2000). Similarly gay men involved in 'chemsex' are often seen as victims of homophobia and in seek of escape and 'disinhibition' (Race et al., 2022). Other gender minorities have been notably neglected in discussions of sexualised drug use (Azbel, this volume). In this section on 'Drugs and sexualities', the authors take up the project of narcofeminism to illuminate the logics of care and connection at work in experiments in desire and sexuality.

João Florêncio offers a deeply personal account of drugs and drug-fuelled clubbing in his piece titled 'Drugs, techno and the ecstasy of queer bodies'. He characterises 'the queer club as a laboratory for experimentations with the plasticity of the self and the social'. In stark contrast to dominant discourses of harm and pathology that frame these 'coming of age' stories in terms of vulnerability and escape, he applies insights from narcofeminism to offer a powerful counter-narrative that centres care and connection: 'taking care of each other: sharing resources and opportunities to improve our mood, health and prosperity' (EHRA, 2019b). This is what makes his last story such a provocative one. As a young man, in a dimly lit club toilet, he is instructed by an older man he has only just met to take a drug he has never consumed before: 'take it, boy'. In contrast to the expectation that such encounters usually culminate in sexual assault and violence, Florêncio describes a pleasant, even mundane experience in which he and the older man 'danced, took breaks outside sitting on the kerb and chatting about all manner of topics'. He tells this story as one of care and connection that runs counter to mainstream cultural imaginaries of sexual violence, deviance and abjection in relation to queer sexualities. The generative possibilities of drug use in queer counter-cultures are foreclosed by these conventional tropes.

So, what happens when these opportunities for queer drugged sociality are indeed, quite literally, closed down? This is exactly what **Lyu Azbel** explores in relation to the COVID-19 lockdown regulations that shut down nightclubs and social venues in Berlin, Germany. Drawing on qualitative interviews with members of Berlin's queer community, Azbel reflects on how they navigated COVID restrictions to create new spaces for sexualised drug use, suggesting that these practices can be understood as narcofeminist acts of resistance. Perhaps then, in ways not unlike the 'drinking at home woman' and her 'small-scale experiments with time space, and consciousness alteration' in Keane's example (this volume), Berlin's queer communities created new ways of taking drugs, having sex and experiencing their bodies in relation to others. Azbel contends that the stringency of COVID-19 public health controls encouraged even more radical and collaborative practices of care to unfold.

Narcofeminist worldbuilding

Against the dominant view of illicit drugs as sources of oppression and deviance, or anti-feminist technologies (Dymock, and Narcofeminist activist interview, this volume), this section, 'Narcofeminist worldbuilding', attends to a mode of feminism that can emerge and even prosper *with* drugs and not merely in spite of them. In our conversation with members of the narcofeminist movement, they described the ways in which they resist being harassed, punished, 'shamed', ignored and silenced for engaging in illicit drug use. They challenge normative prescriptions on what it means to be a woman (subservient and meek) and a drug user (deviant and criminal). But their activism does not end there. In their care practices and advocacy, it is no exaggeration to say they are intimately invested in the project of building a different kind of world (Chang, 2019, 2021; Zigon, 2019; Campbell, this volume). These minoritarian forms of maintenance and care evoke Puig de la Bellacasa's proposal that as feminist scholars and activists, we are actively involved in world-making and the 'material-semiotic becoming of things' (2010, cited in Henry & Lehner, 2019, n.p.).

Threaded through this collection are examples of narcofeminist worldbuilding within which it is crucial to appreciate the work of 'safer' injecting and the provocation of activist art. **Marie Jauffret-Roustide** explores supervised, safer injecting programmes in France. These programmes are underpinned by biomedical knowledge and are concerned with reducing harm (as the name, 'harm reduction', suggests). However, the focus on harm means pleasure is often ignored, which Jauffret-Roustide argues forms part of the prohibitionist order and acts as a mode of governance. In resistance to these 'dominant orders and discourses that centre risk and harm' and apprehend people who inject drugs through a 'lens of vulnerability', Jauffret-Roustide draws attention to clients' 'experiential knowledge and power to act' in these restrictive environments. In other words, she demonstrates clients' 'experimentations of pleasure' and also their relationships with health workers that go beyond a limited notion of harm reduction 'to help them improve their general situation'. It is in this expansion of care beyond biomedicine that the author makes visible how it is possible to hold pleasure and harm together in practices of alternative worldmaking.

The piece speaks directly to the kind of worldbuilding that **Nancy Campbell** advocates for in her conceptualisation of a 'narcofeminist alterlife' that 'calls forth new life

forms and new materializations of bodies in the presence of a constitutive ambivalence'. For Campbell, '[d]rug use produces new forms of embodiment altered within the slippery entanglements of pleasure and pain, violence and care that pervade drug-using social worlds'. This is articulated through the activist artwork of Jamie Harary, 'whose queer feminist harm reduction art places women and gender-nonconforming people at the center of harm reduction in life-affirming ways'. Through her delicate but arresting graphics, she presents different forms of desire, self-realisation and agency in women's drug use, and in doing so challenges the overdetermined iconography of women who use drugs as 'mad, sad or bad' (Ettorre, 1992). In a discursive space where such imagery has had a detrimental effect on the lives of women and other gender minorities, these powerful artworks:

> . . . constitute an 'alterbiopolitics' focused less upon 'coping with biopower,' . . . 'adapting or resisting, and more on creating alternative forms of collective and caring politics within bios'. (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 168, cited in Campbell, this volume).

In a world where drugs are ubiquitous and drug policies are used to control marginalised groups, narcofeminism offers an alternative form of biopolitical care. As well as resisting the violences of biopower that materialise so starkly in the lives of women and gender minorities who use drugs, narcofeminism centres '[c]are as a doing and an ethos that creates ethical obligations [that do] not need to be primarily directed to the ethical edification of human selves: it is about doings required by living communities to live as well as possible' (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 167). Through their everyday practices and advocacy, narcofeminists are dedicated to this 'doing', to making a world where living with drugs is not simply about avoiding harm but reckoning with the possibilities for drug use to support relations of care.

In the spirit of centring the narcofeminist voices that inspired this collection, we end with a quote that encapsulates the narcofeminist vision for a more just world where women and gender diverse people who consume drugs are valued for their difference:

> Society tells us to be quiet and every person that allows us to speak openly to say that women who use drugs are people, are normal people . . . Showing this face of it [is] a great help . . . Narcofeminism . . . allowed me to feel like a person again. Irrespective of the fact that we're from different countries in different cities, this brings us together. It allows us to accept each other the way that we are and to give other women the assurance that we will do the same for them. We look after each other. (Bessonova et al., this volume)

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1. The narcofeminist movement is inclusive of trans and gender diverse people and the term 'womxn' is sometimes used in place of 'women' to capture this inclusivity (EHRA, 2019c).

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