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Abstract

Chemical and Carnival

Fiona McGregor's *chemical palace* and
Sydney's radical queer dance party scene



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Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
University of Sydney, August 2010

Abstract

Dance parties are renowned for the feeling of transcendence they offer participants. When people go 'clubbing', they enter an environment antithetical to their daily lives: a mysterious, sexualised and exciting realm of possibility. During the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1990s, gay, lesbian and queer communities utilised dance parties to conjure a powerful sensation of community and fraternity in the face of the disease. Meanwhile, on the margins of 'gay and lesbian Sydney', an alternative subculture thrived, with ambitious radical queer dance parties bringing colour and energy to Sydney's inner-city ghettos. Fiona McGregor's 2002 novel, *chemical palace*, records the spirit and aesthetic of the dance party scene of the 1990s and early 2000s. McGregor's protracted and sprawling novel is a fantastic foray into literary experimentation written with the aim of recording a diminishing subculture.

In creating a record of the radical queer nightclub scene of the 1990s, McGregor has unwittingly written a manifesto that expresses the ethos and depicts the unique camp and grotesque aesthetic of this scene. Bakhtin's notion of 'the carnivalesque' provides a frame for analysing the power of the party spaces in McGregor's novel, as well as the nature and effects of grotesque performance and symbolism.

Reviewers have been quick to apply labels to McGregor's novel that are, upon consideration, inappropriate for the text. The tendency of critics to categorise the novel as 'grunge fiction' obscures its joyful, affirmative and spectacular qualities, and indiscriminate labels such as 'gay and lesbian fiction' ignore the universal themes of place and transformation at the novel's nucleus. However, in imparting the untold story of radical queer Sydney, *chemical palace* is also an example of 'minor literature', and is thus evaluated in the light of Deleuze and Guattari's three seminal characteristics: 'the deterritorialization of language', the 'connection of the individual to a political immediacy', and the 'collective assemblage of enunciation' (*Minor* 18).

Through McGregor's circular third-person narration and individual character monologues, the reader perceives a sense of impending, profound change for the characters. There is acuity of movement towards an ending or 'winding-down' of their lifestyle that mirrors the violent pace of construction and gentrification of Sydney's inner-city. Elegiac movements in the narrative firstly depict a loss of innocence stemming from exposure to disease and the heightened awareness of risk and danger. This facilitates a movement towards a radical communal sensibility and way of living in response to poverty, illness and crisis. Finally, the narrative charts a slow movement away from that lifestyle, which is presented concurrently as a cause for sadness and a necessary and natural transition. Written during Australia's 'Howard Era', *chemical palace* captures the energy and colour of resistant subcultures and offers an extraordinary and enduring record.

Acknowledgements

It's been an extremely long road from the beginning to the end of this project. I am not the same person as I was I started it. Many people have assisted in ways they may or may not already know. So deep and meaningful 'thank yous' go to:

- Fiona McGregor for writing a book in which we saw ourselves reflected
- Luke T for introducing me to the novel
- Ali H for writing wonderful zines and believing in the 'Reckless Pursuit of Fabulousness'
- Liz S and Louise T for being my inspiration, and interested in the project *always*
- Starkles, Matt, Emma H, Phoebe T, Sarah T, James and Sam M for giving me a place to stay and feel welcome on my numerous trips to Sydney
- Irene M, Jo P, Karen H and the FaHCSIA Library for giving me time off and encouragement in these last months
- Puppet (Dave) for never wavering in friendship and consistently asking, 'how's your thesis?'
- Justin De, Sean R, Sarah M, Steph B, Liam B, Nathan R, Liz C, Erin S and Gemma H for proofreading and/or awesome general support in these last months
- Jorja M, Aaron S, and Peter A for putting up with me and insisting on the abundant value of this undertaking
- Justin Daniells for being *so* supportive and sweet, and doing my dishes so I'd have more time to work ☺
- Mamma Banyer for believing in me! And being *genuinely* interested to hear about what I was writing
- Dad Banyer for insisting I *focus*, and don't spend all my money on 'sex, drugs and rock and roll'
- Nana and Papa Banyer for financial assistance and having faith in me. I'll never forget what Papa said about having a PhD:

'No matter what you do in life or where you go in this world, people will look at you with respect, because you've achieved something great. No one can ever take that away from you.'

Finally, most of all I would like to thank my supervisor, Melissa Hardie – for *everything*.
Emma Banyer

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Chemical and Carnival

We fled suburban banality and places beyond for innercity chaos, saw our salvation in the subterranean night-life. We turned away from our upbringings, demonstrated against the government, we looked for love and purpose, got lucky or died trying. We wore black, we wore leather, bright colours and freaky hairdos. We fucked around. We partied, we took drugs, we dressed up and danced.

That was the same as it is now and has ever been. Always the congregation around music and performance, always the need for transcendence and fantasy. You can change a law overnight but it takes lifetimes to change an attitude. We weren't waiting. Partying was our font, our touchstone, it was our main reality. It was the world in which we truly came alive. (*chemical palace* 167)

This extract from McGregor's 2002 novel is testament to its power as a text of historical record and inspiration for the little-documented radical queer party scene. The novel tells the story of a group of friends who organise alternative dance parties in the early 1990s and 2000s. The parties are colourful and creative non-profit events, usually themed, where people dress up in elaborate and risqué, costumes, and performers challenge social norms with clever and edgy shows. The featured musical styles are electronic: acid/sleazy/dirty house, jungle, drum and bass, and various forms of techno. These parties run late into the night and are fuelled by assorted drugs, most notably amphetamines (ecstasy, speed and crystal methamphetamine). McGregor's narrative incorporates the stories of individual characters within a group centred around a warehouse in Surry Hills. The group put on numerous parties, which punctuate the rambling narrative, and these are described in vibrant, loving detail. McGregor makes no secret of her personal involvement in this scene, saying:

Throughout the 90s I was a full-on party animal. I played as well as worked in the party context. I put on Fanny Palace - a queer theatrical party which had three incarnations at 2 different venues, and then was a weekly club. ... Very early on I went to Mardi Gras - 89 and 90 I think. I marshalled and danced in Go West by the Pet shop Boys! It's true! (Int. 2.¹)

It is no small task for an author to create an accomplished work of fiction based on an actual time and place. Literature that has been created as a fictional account of aspects of the author's own life is particularly open to romanticism, but McGregor's text eschews this potential critique. Furthermore, it cannot be easy for an author to reconcile mixed memories of a world of triumph and joy, as well as struggle and danger. While it must have been tempting to romanticise the experience of belonging to a marginalised, misrepresented, and misunderstood subculture, McGregor strikes a delicate balance in her representation of Sydney's radical queer dance party scene of the 1990s.

The scene in the 1990s and early 2000s in which McGregor was an active participant was characterised by creativity and passion, but it was also a scene with unstable boundaries; a community with a transient, part-time membership, multiple overlapping histories, disparate beliefs and agendas, and an ingrained resistance towards labels and categories. These features of the radical queer subculture make it particularly challenging to represent in fiction, and the role of drugs and alcohol in affecting the memories of those who were there further complicate the question of the 'accuracy' or 'authenticity' of McGregor's representation. When writing

¹ Interview 2, conducted with Fiona McGregor is at Appendix 2.

from experience, it can be more obvious that an author is writing subjectively. However *all* fiction writing is subjective, and whatever the setting and situation that an author recreates in their text, they can offer the reader only one perspective – their own. In *chemical palace*, McGregor is completely at ease with this fact, making no attempt at objectivity, or claim to it. She uses her memories, kept artefacts, the stories of friends, past lovers and contemporaries, and a bare skeleton of historical facts to create a fictional narrative that nevertheless achieves both social relevance and literary success.

McGregor believes that ‘writing and publishing a book is an invitation to the entire world’ (Int. 1.²), and *chemical palace* particularly constitutes this invitation, as it represents an integral part of the author’s life story. McGregor’s refusal to sanitise the text for the purpose of universality engenders the novel’s honesty, value and authority as a cultural (even historical) record. Her construction of places, characters and feelings is achieved in a way that is organic to the author’s aim of portraying the radical queer scene of the 1990s and early 2000s. McGregor’s innovative style ultimately resulted in the novel being short-listed for the Premier’s Award in 2002. This style is refreshingly *unstructured*, having no discernible singular plot, and its narrative lines are numerous, spreading out in all directions. It has various primary characters; with traffic emerging only towards the end as a possible main character (and yet this label is counterproductive, as it devalues the roles that Slip and Holmes play in the text). Various first person monologues interweave a tenuously objective third person narration that abandons objectivity at numerous points in the text, betraying the author’s personal investment in her subjects. The novel reads in some parts like traditional narrative fiction, some parts like a social or political manifesto, and at others like a biography or autobiography. It is an extensive and energetic novel, attractive as much for its naivety as for its sophistication. The novel explores themes of drug use and abuse; sexual desire and experimentation; place and geography; history and change; nationalism; cultural oppression, gentrification and over-policing; social welfare; friendship; love and the breakdown of relationships; disease, infection and medication; pain and human memory; joy and pleasure; bodies and corporeality; and, nostalgia, death and loss. The question is: how can we discuss this complex text without reducing or ignoring its pluralism, multiplicity, and contradictions? Methodologically speaking, an answer lies in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.

A chemical assemblage

If we embrace Deleuze and Guattari’s view of literature as an assemblage, doing away with the imperative to seek central systems of symbolism, and signifiers, we are free to discuss the novel as a collection of ideas, memories, themes and topics, imaginings and statements; all different, all variously related, and all important (*Plateaus* 4). This is more productive than trying to explain the novel in relation to traditional literary genres, imposing a primary theme or message, or trying to locate the text in specific economies of symbolism. It is not about whether Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizome theory is ‘right’ or ‘correct’ – I do not intend to make judgments on its quality or intrinsic value here. My embrace of their approach to literary analysis, exemplified in their study of Kafka, is strategic in the context of this project. McGregor’s novel must be looked at through a very different lens than her other works, which are more traditional in a literary sense. While *chemical palace* is literary, and even contains moments that link it overtly to Australian literary tradition, there is far more at stake in its conception than singularly literary aims and achievements. If not simply literary, what is this

² Interview 1, conducted with Fiona McGregor is at Appendix 1.

text? If not by predominantly literary standards, how may we explore or evaluate this novel? Here, again, the views of Deleuze and Guattari are vital:

A book exists only through the outside and on the outside. A book itself is a little machine; what is the relation (also measurable) of this literary machine to a war machine, love machine, revolutionary machine, etc. – and an *abstract machine* that sweeps them along?when one writes, the only question is which other machine the literary machine can be plugged into, must be plugged into in order to work.

(*Plateaus 4*)

The conception of ‘a book’ as first and foremost part of the world is at the heart of my analysis of *chemical palace*. In the chapters that follow, I explore questions of genre, style and literary tradition, as the *Australian Literary Machine* is one of the machines that the novel ‘plugs into’. However, I do not privilege this machine over the *radical queer culture machine*, the *Sydney machine*, the *disease machine* and *carnavalesque machine*; in fact the opposite is true.

Born of a desire to document the vibrant radical queer dance party culture of the 1990s, *chemical palace* is at once a ‘collective assemblage of enunciation’ (Deleuze and Guattari *Minor 18*), a personal (or *semi*-autobiographical) fiction, and an assemblage of statements on related socio-political themes. Lacking chapter breaks, chronological flow and traditional narrative movement, the novel seems at times a schizophrenic collection of images, narrative lines, diverse styles and inserted media. This comes as no surprise when we consider some of its primary subjects – the dance party scene, drug taking, and dancing – in more detail. Deleuze and Guattari tell us that ‘[t]here is no difference between what a book talks about and how it is made’ (*Plateaus 4*). This is a particularly appropriate observation when applied to *chemical palace*. The narrative follows the passage of recreational drug taking; from ecstasy and joy to a sombre flatness, which is followed again by waking up to a new day. The sections of poetry, song lyrics, dance party fliers and newspaper articles bring common media from the scene into the text and help to create a staccato rhythm that mimics the pace of dance party spaces. These are just a few examples of the way in which the literary construction of *chemical palace* embodies dance party culture, and the way that the book is ‘made the same’ as what it talks about. My fourth chapter discusses the style, movement and construction of the novel in detail.

In articulating their rhizomatic view of literature, Deleuze and Guattari also claim that: A book has neither object nor subject; it is made of various formed matters, and very different dates and speeds. To attribute the book to a subject is to overlook this working of matters, and the exteriority of their relations. It is to fabricate a beneficent God to explain geological movements. In a book, as in all things, there are lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata and territories; but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification. (*Plateaus 3*)

This philosophy encourages us to focus on themes and topics, snap-shots and moments in the novel, rather than what text ‘means’. I do not intend to make grand statements about McGregor or the novel, and I do not seek to ‘understand’ her writing; my intention in this project has been to draw out the themes and features that inspire discussion on dance party and to ‘plug’ them into literary, theoretical, political, social and historical machines. This project does not valorise the text or its author; arguments I make throughout the project as to the general value of the text are modest. The value of *chemical palace* lies in the way in which McGregor has fused the book’s subjects and its style. She has created the text as an experience for the reader, and to achieve this she has *recreated* the pace and atmosphere of the scene it records. Most importantly, I propose that the novel be viewed as ‘a report’, in Deleuze and

Guattari's sense of the word (*Minor* 7). In their interrogation of Kafka's work the authors explain that they do not 'try to find archetypes', look for 'so-called free associations' or even attempt to 'interpret' Kafka's writing and imagery (7). These are practices that Deleuze and Guattari see as reductive and counterproductive in the context of writing about fiction. They propose instead to see fiction writing as:

... *experimentation* that is without interpretation or significance and rests only on tests of experience: 'I am not appealing for any man's verdict, I am only imparting knowledge, I am only making a report. To you also, honored Members of the Academy, I have only made a report.' (7, original emphasis)

McGregor's *chemical palace* is also a report; a product of expression and experimentation that benefits from a playful approach to criticism. It is a report about dancing, queerness, disease and friendship, as well as Sydney and its inner-suburbs. More precisely, it is a report about all this in the 1990s and early 2000s, and in a specific phase of the author's own life – youth. The writer brings memories together with an immense imagination, as well as political, social and cultural analysis, to recreate a life she has since grown away from. The arbitrary, thrown-together appearance of the text gives it a naïve, organic 'naturalness' and this lies at the heart of its effectiveness as a report on radical queer dance party culture. The book is a triumph of memory and fantasy, originating in a world where the two are indistinguishable.

Approaches offered by Deleuze and Guattari provide certain tactics for talking about text, and for discussing the novel as a 'little machine', which connects with surrounding machines. In the process of laying out this approach, Deleuze and Guattari also offer a useful vocabulary:

All we talk about are multiplicities, lines, strata and segmentarities, lines of flight and intensities, machinic assemblages and their various types, bodies without organs and their construction and selection, the plane of consistency, and in each case the units of measure. (*Plateaus* 4)

In the course of exploring *chemical palace*, I have organised my discussion loosely into themes: the scene in the book and the actual historical scene; the notion of 'carnival' and dance floor spaces; Sydney in the book; disease in the book, and on the historical scene; sexuality and the abject; camp and the grotesque, and; nationalism and nostalgia in the novel. Through freely exploring these themes I am able to identify meaningful intensities, machinic connections and identifiable 'lines of flight'. This project engages with the novel only through lines of flight, and its only currency is intensities. It takes the novel as inspiration and finds connections with outside texts and ideas, linking the author's images and enunciations with multiple social and theoretical machines – some the author may have intended or expected, and some she did not. The project applies Deleuze and Guattari's 'tests of experience' to the text, and does not aim to determine what the book *says*, but what it can *do*, and what can be done with it.

This project does not ignore the structure of the text, nor does it neglect to document and investigate component-parts of the whole, including language use, narrative structure and imagery. It rather takes the text as the author's report on radical queer dance party culture in Sydney in the 1990s and early 2000s, and looks at it as an 'assemblage'. The concept of an assemblage in this analysis of *chemical palace* refers to both the way the author has constructed her text (component parts are viewed and their mechanisms considered), and the way it functions with broader machines, and makes machinic connections. My claim that the text is constructed from fragments and intensities is supported by the author's own description of the work:

... *chemical palace* was aleatoric, proceeding from flashpoint to flashpoint in an often circular fashion, driven by mood, phrasing, tone. Structurally, what it resembled the most was a DJ set – a series of seemingly separate pieces mixed across one another to form an emotional journey. ('Mutant' 218)

Drawing on Eugene P. Kirk's exploration of the 'anti-genre' of *Menippean Satire*, my fourth chapter plots the unusual generic techniques and structural elements of *chemical palace*, and considers how McGregor's writing style interacts especially well with her representation of drug use and dance music. Viewing the novel as a kind of *Menippean construction* assists in adding to the vocabulary that facilitates a mapping of the disparate parts of the assemblage that is *chemical palace*. It would be reductive to try to 'tease out' of such a text a central theme or set of seminal symbols; the author has succeeded in making a book that is 'about' many different things, and offers numerous 'messages' – some of which are contradictory, and many of which are unresolved. Discussing the text as an assemblage is useful and logical. It provides great scope for interrogating features of the novel in infinitely diverse ways, utilising a multiplicity of analytical methods and *modi operandum*. However, this approach has also thrown up substantial challenges to maintaining analytical coherence. Not wishing to claim that McGregor's novel promotes any particular message, and being unwilling to name the topics or subjects represented in the book as 'themes', it has been useful instead to centre the discussion on *intensities of subject*. It is certainly appropriate to look for and discuss intensities in a text whose author admits to having constructed it from intensities. When writing, McGregor purportedly begins 'with an image, place or feeling' and constructs her narrative around and between these intensities of subject and theme ('Mutant' 218). A detailed discussion of these intensities will follow, but first, a question: what makes *chemical palace* a communal record of the radical queer scene (perhaps even a manifesto)?

Collective enunciation

Guy Davidson's 2004 article, 'Minor Literature, Microculture: Fiona McGregor's *Chemical Palace*' is one of a very small number of scholarly engagements with the novel, as well as the most substantial. Davidson proposes that the scene represented in the novel is a 'microculture'; a sort of 'margin on the margins' of the gay and lesbian mainstream (141). The term 'microculture' is useful for creating a distinction between the scene in *chemical palace* and the subjects of most contemporary subcultural theory which, as Davidson argues, have essential differences to the scene represented in *chemical palace* (142-3). While I do not intend to delve into subcultural theory, one of these differences, according to Davidson, is that much of the culture in *chemical palace* is decidedly outside of (or at least in a complex relation to) commercial and capitalist systems (140-1). The cultural productions, styles and experiences represented in *chemical palace* are not examples of 'style-surfing', and they do not represent popular, mediatised, and commoditised 'subcultural looks', like punk or goth: the subcultural practices in McGregor's novel are 'forms of resistance within consumer capitalism' (141). Davidson proposes the application of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of minor literature to the text (143). Deleuze and Guattari define as a minor literature as 'that which a minority constructs within a major language' (*Minor* 16). The suitability of the label 'minor literature' does not always depend upon the identity or background of the author; factors related to the subject matter, intention of the text, and method of construction more clearly delineate the potential of a text to be considered 'minor literature'. Deleuze and Guattari claim that everything in a minor literature is political by 'nature' and that in a minor literature 'everything takes on a collective value' (*Minor* 17). McGregor's *chemical palace* is

a minor text because it tells the collective story or a minority subculture – the story of a ‘microculture’. McGregor’s summary of the novel’s plotlines is illuminating:

In this case the story is more about the communal than the personal, so you have several narrative threads, and a barely dominant main character – traffic.

... Inside *chemical palace* is a conventional novel about drug addiction – traffic and speed (crystal at the end) – which probably would have been more commercially viable because it is exactly the kind of story people expect from the context. But I couldn’t leave it there all alone, it simply couldn’t exist without all the other narratives running through and around. (Int. 1.)

Academic and journalistic reconstructions of 1990s youth culture as a period of ‘hedonistic raving’ and failed drug experimentation generally take a fatalistic and negative view that reinstalls the individualism of consumer capitalism. These narratives posit ‘rave culture’ as a failed attempt to create something better than the ‘greed is good’, capitalist ideology of the 1980s, which represented a world in which there was little satisfactory space for the exuberance and creativity of youth (Brabazon 2002; Mattessi 2004). Tara Brabazon’s article in *Youth Studies Australia* 21.1 (2002) typifies the attitude that drugs (particularly ecstasy) destroyed the potential of dance party culture to ‘change the world’ in any meaningful way, and left participants feeling jaded:

Ecstasy creates a euphoric sense of community, collective and sensory belonging. The working week can never capture the explosion of sound and meaning of the ‘the big weekend’. Therefore, there remains a nostalgic desire for that moment on the dancefloor where everything ‘made sense’. Nostalgia and loss of the ‘big community’ becomes the addictive trigger. After the chemical saturation of dance culture, the pessimistic let down is always pendulous and dark. (21)

Views such as Brabazon’s are disappointingly common. This perspective conveniently ignores the continued popularity of ecstasy and similar drugs, the vibrant and continuing diversification and evolutions of dance party culture, rave culture and doofs³. Furthermore, blaming ‘nostalgia’ for individual drug-abuse and addiction is problematic to say the least⁴. McGregor’s narrative offers the more sophisticated viewpoint of one who understands the culture about which she is writing. The novel incorporates a ‘conventional [plot] about drug addiction’ (traffic’s speed and crystal habit), but intersperses this with evidence of the positive and productive aspects of drug use. This is where McGregor’s book is unique and important: she has not been seduced (by the possibility of greater commercial success) into writing a tale that is ‘exactly the kind of story people expect from the context’, but rather – from a sense of responsibility and desire – has sought to represent the many facets of a lifestyle and scene that the author sees as essentially productive. This particular story had not yet been recorded in a substantial, lasting form of literary expression until *chemical palace*. McGregor’s prose is charged with an imperative to record the scene in its complexity (to make a report about it), before the memories and images are lost forever.

Meaningful intensities

A minor literature exhibits intensities that are meaningful on many levels at once (Deleuze and Guattari *Minor* 17). What are ‘intensities’ in literature? Which ones are meaningful and what makes them so? If it could be said that there is a single aim for this project, it would be my

³ ‘Doofs’ are dance parties held in outdoor locations. They are usually illicit.

⁴ Brabazon’s article is discussed in greater depth in Chapters 2 and 6.

desire to explain why McGregor's *chemical palace* is such a powerful evocation and record of radical queer dance party culture. Here I feel compelled to acknowledge my own extensive experience in this scene: I spent much of my free time 'clubbing' between 2001 and 2006 and was especially interested in the more radical dance parties, even being actively involved in organising some. It was not until 2004 that a friend introduced me to McGregor's text. The book spread quickly through our extended network of radical queer dance party enthusiasts, with most readers feeling that it captured the experience in a commanding and exceptional way. To me, the novel was an epiphany. I had been collecting 'zines'⁵ and dance party fliers, small-press publications, such as *Wicked Women* and *SLIT* magazine, and various other material on dance party culture, in the hope of finding enough material to construct a significant study into the literary expressions of radical dance party culture. As soon as I encountered McGregor's novel, it became the primary focus of this study, being the most substantial and sophisticated literary expression arising from radical queer culture. However, this is not a metafictional study, and I do not utilise my personal experience as a primary source of evidence in this project. This project is a hybrid discussion of the novel and its scene in context, peppered by the results of a process of multidisciplinary 'play', in which I plug the text into various historical, sociological, philosophical and theoretical texts. I do not make statements or judgements about the accuracy of McGregor's representation of the scene, as much as I do not evaluate the text on purely literary grounds. This project explains why this book means so much to the scene, its past and present devotees, and to radical queer Australian social history; particularly that of Sydney. My project also uses the text – by mapping its various intensities and following its lines of flight – to explore new ways of looking at dance party culture, new ways of understanding what it is and why it is. I am definitely *not* saying that *chemical palace* is only of interest to those with a passion for clubbing and dance party performance and events, and I am *not* saying the book is only of interest to radical queer Sydney-siders. The novel has much to recommend it as a text of contemporary Australian Literature and depicts themes to interest many Australian readers, and the novel's short-listing for the Premier's Award in 2002 also demonstrates that this minor text has major appeal. However, it is the role of this text as a book *for* the scene and of the scene that interests me most. In 1996, around the time that McGregor began writing *chemical palace*, she said: 'I am not interested so much in the margins of a world I don't fit into as the centres of the worlds into which I do fit' ('Lesbian' 32).

Davidson employs Deleuze and Guattari's descriptions of the role of minor literature to demonstrate how being marginalised allows an author room for creativity (143). He draws our attention to Deleuze and Guattari's claim is that minor literature offers 'the possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility' (*Minor* 17). This possibility can also be understood as a compulsion: it is impossible *not* to forge new communities, consciousness and sensibilities in the process of telling minor stories, because these new ways of being already exist and literature is simply running to catch up. Again we are reminded that what a book talks about is the same as how it's made. McGregor *recreates* dance party culture in her novel, feeding back into the community a sense of itself through cleverly constructed, meaningful intensities. In this project I name and map the intensities of dance party culture according to a carnivalesque model, and analyse the unique intensities of radical dance party culture in the period of Australia's AIDS crisis. I also analyse existent and potential lines of intensity between the text

⁵ 'Zines' are homemade, photocopied, small-run publications that are created and traded as part of an international cultural phenomenon.

and the scene itself. Drawing on the analysis of doofs presented in *FreeNRG: Notes from the Edge of the Dancefloor* (2001), and Jonathan Bollen's (1999) thesis on gay and lesbian dance floor practice, Marxist constructions of work and play, and much more, this project explores the relationship of alternative dance parties to politics, lifestyle, work and recreation. Using Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque to discuss dance floor practice and to explain the grotesque in radical queer performance, this project also touches on camp, the abject and the erotic. Finally, in his discussion of *chemical palace* as a minor text, Davidson elucidates the novel's role as a record that concurrently memorialises the scene (142). Nostalgia is a deep and intricate theme of the novel, and one that produces some of the most compelling intensities, as McGregor charts an alleged demise of radical queer culture in Australia. A discussion of change, death and endings is offered in Chapter 7 to reconcile the composite statements and intensities of *chemical palace*.

'Serious play': the work of *chemical palace*

As a method of academic inquiry, 'play' is a most appropriate response to *chemical palace* because play is a primary notion in the novel. Davidson also identifies play as critical to the culture represented in McGregor's text (143). The bacchanalian party events represented in the novel are a form of 'serious play' involving a progressive kind of work, and the author's approach to recording the scene demonstrates a kind of 'invested play'. Furthermore, motifs of work and play reappear throughout the text as the author actively encourages her readers to play – both with the text, and in the world in general. It is appropriate then that any method of analysis for this text is playful, experimental, joyous and celebratory. Deleuze and Guattari's approach to minor literature proposes the investigational tactic of entering at any point in the text:

We will enter, then, by any point whatsoever; none matters more than another, and no entrance is more privileged even if it seems an impasse, a tight passage, a siphon. We will be trying only to discover what other points our entrance connects to, what crossroads and galleries one passes through to link two points, what the map of the rhizome is and how the map is modified if one enters by another point. Only the principle of multiple entrances prevents the introduction of the enemy, the Signifier and those attempts to interpret work that is actually only open to experimentation.
(*Minor 3*)

This approach not only allows for play in the analysis of fiction, but actively encourages it. The concept of play adopted in this study is neither frivolous nor superficial. To analyse a text on party culture, in which the characters 'take their fun very seriously indeed' (Ley para. 4), it is beneficial to adopt a set of conditions for analysis that make room for the intricacies of the plot and deviation in genre, style and technique, while freeing the novel from established conventions of literary judgment. The numerous lines of flight that *chemical palace* inspires achieve their full potential only when playful and experimental theoretical poses are struck. The practice of playing with the narrative by entering at random points, for example, permits us to discuss the profuse themes and emanations in the text without subjecting them to a forced hierarchy, or defining one as central.

This study does not set about to find the 'truth' of the novel or the author, nor does it even seek to explore the writing in mind-boggling detail. It is not a feminist reading, or a post-structuralist reading, or even a reading that applies the frameworks offered by one particular theorist. This is not a queer reading, although I do utilise the work of queer theorists when it contributes to the processes of playing with the text. This is not a purely literary reading, nor a

purely sociological reading, although it does include sociological analysis. Furthermore, despite my loose application of Deleuze and Guattari's ideas in framing my approaches to the text, this is not simply a Deleuzian study of *chemical palace*. This thesis is a socio-literary exploration of the novel that takes into account both what is *in* the novel and what is *outside* of it. It is as much about the scene as it is about McGregor's book, and it also concerns several other books, essays, articles and ideas that have connected into these lines of flight along the way. This project represents a schizophrenically theoretical and sociological review of the text as it functions in and around the scene itself. I am interested in how this book connects to its world in the Deleuzian sense. I analyse the novel as both a record of, and an inspiration for, radical dance party culture in Australia.

Dance floor as carnivalesque space

Dance parties and clubbing are renowned for the feeling of transcendence they provide participants. When we go 'clubbing', we enter an environment that is antithetical to our usual daily lives: it is dark and somewhat anonymous, sexualised and exciting. Dance party spaces are designed exclusively for human enjoyment, for activities of fun and leisure, and their activities are designed to make us feel *alive* – to foster an experience of transcendence, away from the work-a-day world. Brabazon asserts that: 'Such moments are not escapist: they are transcendent' (19). Historically the pursuit of pleasure for pleasure's sake, called 'hedonism' or 'bacchanalia', has attracted its share of criticism and repression. History is littered with examples of ruling elites attempting to quash, repress or co-opt cultures of drug-taking, dance and pleasures of the flesh – from the dance halls of Weimar Berlin (Gordon 2000) to contemporary communist China (Chew 2009). The 'partying' phenomenon continues to be studied around the world; in leisure studies, queer studies, drug and alcohol research, and human geography among other disciplines. In literary history, the most famous and thorough interrogation of mankind's insatiable desire to 'party' may be found in Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* (originally published in 1965 but written during the Second World War). Bakhtin's study of the writing of Francois Rabelais illuminates the critical social role of laughter, pleasure, joy and abandonment. Through his analysis of Rabelais' texts, Bakhtin proposes that the Medieval folk culture practised during feasts and festivals, which has previously been dismissed as 'hedonistic', can in fact be understood as 'carnavalesque' (*Rabelais* 3-9).

Drawing on Bakhtin's analysis, my study examines radical dance party culture as a contemporary example of carnival, and the dance floor as a carnivalesque space. While McGregor's *chemical palace* documents personal experiences of transcendence through self-expression and communal joy, the author also devotes the narrative to capturing the specificities of communal dialogue in the nightclub space, and the comparatively relaxed inter-relationships between dance party participants. The events the novel describes occupy a similar social position as the medieval feasts and festivals, during which Bakhtin says participants 'built a second world and a second life outside officialdom' (*Rabelais* 6). Contemporary dance party spaces use lighting, music and decorations to provide a seamless experience that transports the participant into a dimension of possibility. The radical dance party is a second world for participants, which promotes new, idyllic social interactions and fosters a socially-critical performance and art culture that empowers people who are disenfranchised in society at large. While this is not purely a Bakhtinian study, his notion of the carnivalesque is used extensively and consistently, as it is a most natural referent for the radical queer dance party scene. Its economies illuminate what is happening in practice in

dance party spaces, particularly those involving performance, as all the spaces do in *chemical palace*.

In addition to the productive use of Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque as a way of conceptualising and contextualising dance parties and the dance floor, it can also be put to work in discussing the writing and structure of the novel itself. While refusing to surrender a Deleuzian scepticism towards interpretation, this thesis also explores *chemical palace* through the Bakhtinian notion of a 'carnivalized sense of the world', as described in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). Peering at *chemical palace* through the lens of carnivalization we see McGregor's literary construction not foremost as an example of postmodern bricolage or avant-garde experimentalism, but as an expression of Mennipea and of the carnivalesque. Whether intentional or not, McGregor has evoked a strong sense of medieval carnivalesque, represented most overtly in traffic's costumed persona of the coxcomb (court jester)⁶. The connection is, however, more than simply literal: the party culture represented is a contemporary manifestation of the carnivalesque, governed by similar economies and pursued for similar aims as Medieval carnival. A study of the scene of *chemical palace* benefits from being plugged into theories of the carnivalesque, and the novel has many connecting features with the 'carnivalized' literature Bakhtin defines. These include: heterogenous language, tone and style, a reliance on experience for its subjects, and an urgent connection to the everyday, to zones of 'familiar contact' (*Problems* 108). As well as constructing radical queer dance party as a contemporary manifestation of carnival, this study also connects McGregor's text with the carnivalised genres of fiction described by Bakhtin.

A fascinating aspect of Bakhtin's carnivalesque machine that *chemical palace* can be plugged into is that essential aesthetic feature of carnival – the grotesque. McGregor's *chemical palace* is set in what is historically considered to be Australia's HIV/AIDS crisis period. As well as looking at HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C as themes within the novel, this study documents their role in the performance, fashion, and ethos of radical queer dance party culture. The delinquent self-identification and marginal social positioning of HIV-positive individuals has given rise to a new kind of self-expression, though costume and performance that challenges and expands existing notions of camp. The intimate relationship between disease and artistic expression in radical queer cultural production fosters a grotesque camp aesthetic that reconfigures representations of sexuality and the body. Bakhtin's discussion of medieval grotesque, in which the body is exaggerated and degraded in an egalitarian, 'festive and utopian' spirit (*Rabelais* 19), informs my analysis of these radical queer projects of reclaiming and celebrating queer bodies. The camp cultural production captured within McGregor's novel adds a valuable voice to continuing dialogues on camp as an expression of queer ideas.

Finally, while this project conceptualises *chemical palace* as an assemblage of themes and topics rather than as a coherent narrative with a central focus, it does favour certain images, themes and trajectories over others, and utilises certain external theories more decisively than others. What interests me most in this study is the act of playing with the text like parts of various puzzles, fitting its pieces into pieces of appropriate theory and observing the results. Delightfully, many productive lines of flight evolve, myriad readings are inspired, and openings into the text are discovered and exploited. Furthermore, my aim of plugging

⁶ This important costume is discussed at length in Chapter 5.

chemical palace into the various machines surrounding it leads to an analysis which demonstrates potential *uses* for the novel. How is a novel like *chemical palace* useful? What are the various applications for it? To understand this, we must consider this work of fiction's particular relationship to real places, history and quixotic life. Although this thesis is arranged into chapters that focus on themes and topics, throughout the project I identify examples and '[p]rinciples of connection and heterogeneity' (Deleuze and Guattari *Plateaus* 7), and map their relevance for the reader and for the cultural life of the radical queer dance party scene. This project is a carefully-constructed free discussion, a project of mapping planes of consistency and meaningful machinic connections, a project of placing a text fully into its contexts and teasing out the products of these connections. Most importantly, this is a project of serious play.

1. The Chemical Palace: Sydney's radical queer dance party scene

She remembered the salient moments of beauty and absurdity. The Indonesian waiter in schoolgirl drag at her first Sydney dance party, awestruck, in heaven. The beautiful couple in corsets who shared a joint with her, all the friendly poofers. At 5am when cigarettes were scarce, the compulsory drag in the toilets with a queue of dykes to her forty pack of Horizon. A room full of misfits who all seemed to be in love, the props the lights the shows, what shows. And most of all the music. (73)

McGregor named her novel after a mix tape made for her by Lanny K, a DJ she worked with in the 1990s. The title embodies the dance party spaces on which much of the novel is based. By McGregor's definition, the radical queer dance party scene is 'a dream realm. A make-believe place where an array of people uncomfortable in the mainstream can get together and celebrate' (Int. 1.). For the purpose of this study, the capitalised phrase 'The Chemical Palace' refers to the scene that the novel represents, and the italicised '*chemical palace*' is used for McGregor's novel. I have chosen to reproduce the novel's title without capital letters, in keeping with the author's intent. The choice to leave proper nouns un-capitalised is indicative of the radical queer scene in the 1990s, where individuals (such as traffic in the novel) chose aliases for themselves to replace the names given to them by their parents, frequently dropping the capital letters that characterise proper nouns. The elimination of capital letters in names is a rejection of paternal authority, of 'officialdom', and of the weight of family expectation. In *chemical palace*, when Jo becomes a DJ she is given the title of 'Slip' (a shortening of 'Slippery Jo'):

Of course it didn't describe her playing style very well, especially not later when she got known and hired for hard deep rolling trance. But she didn't care about her nickname one way or the other. It seemed appropriate to be called one thing by your family, another by your friends and by the public. One could never have too many aliases. (50)

The rejection of capital letters also recalls feminist cultural production, where capitals have been construed as imposing and unnecessarily egotistical: bell hooks famously rejected the capitalisation of her pen name, wanting readers to focus on the content of her books rather than who was writing them (Williams para. 1). McGregor's unconventional use of capitalisation in *chemical palace* could also reference to the misuse of capital letters by poets such as e.e. cummings, Lucille Clifton and Sonia Sanchez. Lloyd N. Dendinger claims that cummings and his contemporaries were hoping to bring back 'value and integrity' to words by breaking through the formality and restriction of the poetry of the past (xiii). For cummings, omitting capital letters, along with utilising jazz rhythms, performed a function designed to make poetry and language 'new' (Dendinger xiii). The lack of capitalisation in the title of *chemical palace* is mirrored in the pseudonym of traffic. There is conscious irony in the way McGregor's central character is self-effaced, as if 'traffic' is not a proper noun but a verb. The concept of traffic as a verb has significant and diverse meanings within the broader context of the novel, representing movement, change and instability in identities. McGregor applies the same logic of effacement to her rendition of the radical queer dance party scene itself, resisting any tendency to permanency. The lack of capitalisation in McGregor's name for the scene demonstrates her view of the scene as impermanent and contingent. The scene is constantly renewed because its participants resist attempts to define it. Herein lies the paradox of McGregor's novel – while she creates a static record of the scene as it evolved through the

1990s, she also promotes an ethos that rejects mythologising and stabilisation. McGregor's targeted lack of capitalisation communicates the belief that constant renewal keeps things alive: stagnation is death.

McGregor's construction of the scene as a 'dream realm' or 'imagined community' does not take away from its materiality, or the very real experiences participants have in this space⁷. It does, rather, explicate the space as idealised and contingent; a space in which likeminded people come together to construct an alternative social sphere that is driven by vastly different economies to the work-a-day world. In answering the question 'what is/was The Chemical Palace', we must examine the scene that motivated McGregor to write the novel. To facilitate this examination, a selection of material from the 1990s is discussed, including editorials and articles from Sydney-based alternative independent media, such as *Wicked Women* and *Hell Bent*, as well as advertisements for dance parties and events. This material is used to explore the character and articulation of radical queer dance party culture and provide a context for the parties, costumes and performances described in *chemical palace*. Considering material that originated in the scene from which the novel arose allows us to plug the text into its context, from which its lines of flight branch out.

Hell Bent: Sydney's radical queer culture in the 90s

In the 1990s, independently-published serials such as *Wicked Women* and *Hell Bent* performed a principal role in the evolution of aesthetics, politics and culture in radical queer communities. These publications provided an outlet for radical queer writers and artists to disseminate their writing and images, as well as providing readers with a representation of 'people like themselves', people to which they could relate. In alternative subcultural groups, small-press publications provide a vibrant talking point, where culture is developed and discussed. They also offer a context in which a sense of being a part of the community can be imagined and experienced. Editions of *Wicked Women* and *Hell Bent* from the 1990s present a plethora of material that describes the radical queer culture that McGregor sought to represent in *chemical palace*. Published by the non-commercial, independent group 'Wicked Women Publications', *Hell Bent* was a radical queer street-mag with a modest distribution. In *Hell Bent* 2.5 (1991), editors Kerry Bashford, Mickey Halliday and Jasper Laybutt describe a vibrant and political queer cultural scene in Sydney's inner-suburbs, and promote related national and international scenes. The editors introduce readers to recently-released queer fiction and promote upcoming events at *Wicked Women's* 'new residence', a warehouse space in Chippendale that they share with 'artists of all persuasions' (2). Published material such as this from the early 1990s supports the claims in *chemical palace* regarding the vibrancy and creative vigour of the radical queer scene at that time, where Sydney is described as a 'partytown' (5). Like the lists of activities enthusiastically promoted in *Hell Bent*, the early pages of *chemical palace* paint a picture of Sydney as a vibrant place where there 'always was and always will be something happening' (38).

Conveying the fervent energy and commotion that characterises the era represented in her novel, McGregor offers the following list:

Summer, party season. They worked and played their various ways through the long hot months. The orgy of New Year's Eve fireworks hanging in the air like giant chandeliers over the dark stage of city-fringed harbour, a small gathering at the

⁷ I am referring to Benedict Anderson's notion of communities as imagined and discursively produced (6-7).

warehouse where everybody dressed up for a strut. A cabaret season where they found another performer for their germinating party. A dance party at the Rooftop, a girls' play party off Cleveland the following week. There were cocktails on the roof of Holmes' Bondi building for his birthday in late February, hot pink moonrise out of the sea and later a party at the surf lifesaving club. Dawn by the ocean, bodies aching and loose from dancing. One by one they stripped off their outfits and ran down the sand into the surf. (25-6)

The author's characteristic juxtaposition of long and short sentences creates a tantalising rhythm in this extract, as she seduces the reader with images of summer, warmth and youth. The tone of carefree happiness created by the repetitions of 'play' and 'party' is further developed by the tongue-in-cheek, mock-formal phrase 'dressed up for a strut', which is reminiscent of Fats Domino's *Darktown Strutters' Ball*, a classic song about getting ready for a 'big night out'. The dramatic metaphor of the harbour as a 'city-fringed' stage that is lit by 'giant chandeliers' communicates the point that for the characters of *chemical palace* the world is stage and performance is indivisible from life. An unbridled love of the city is evident in this early section of the novel that is later complicated by loss, change and time. Zeal and a passionate fervour for the city is displayed when McGregor names the places associated with each party or event, as if the inner-city is her playground and she is drawing us a map. The extract concludes with an affirmation of party culture, where the overjoyed friends strip off their costumes and paraphernalia and cool their tired bodies in the sea.

Whilst fictional, the McGregor's novel follows the shape of the author's own journey as a member of Sydney's radical queer scene in the 1990s. McGregor describes herself as 'a full-on party animal' in the 1990s and reveals that she was instrumental in the organisation of numerous events. Describing the scene and her involvement in it, McGregor says:

Then there were some girly clubs way back then – Bitchin, On the Other Side, the last of the Wicked Events. I produced a peep show at Strut Yr Smut – a girly but mixed party with loads of shows and backroom and dancefloor – in 94 or 95. I began performing with AnA Wojak in 1998. senVoodoo went on into the 21st century. We performed at Homo Eclectus parties, Inquisition, No Holes Barred, Gurlesque, Grunt, other places. (Int. 2.)

This intense period of involvement in radical queer nightclub culture is evident in McGregor's (re)creations of the parties in *chemical palace*, and so is the author's own experience with drug use. McGregor explains that she once worked in a well-known bar on Oxford Street in the late 1990s, regularly 'using' and selling drugs on a small ('petty') scale. She says:

I was a punter at Sex n Subculture, Jamie and Vanessas, Inquisition, Klub Kooky, Phoenix, Filth, Fierce, Mash and went to bush doofs and raves as well sometimes.

There were great techno parties back then. (Int. 2)

While the author is open about her past, I do not intend to speculate on her personal experience with drugs, or the question of how closely her characters are related to herself or persons close to her. An auto/biographical study does not interest me in relation to this text, as *chemical palace* is first and foremost a *communal* text. While McGregor certainly took drugs and organised dance parties in a similar fashion to the characters in her novel, to individualise the story is to strip it of its role as a record for the community. However, to ignore the author's personal investment in her subject would be equally limiting. McGregor's novel attempts to capture the essence of the scene, not to present an objective or factual account. While there is an autobiographical 'bent' to the text, there is also evidence of a creative process of *reimagining* the scene. For instance, while McGregor took inspiration for her costumes and characters from

real people and events, she also used the medium of fiction to expand the boundaries of what was possible: 'I figured that what I couldn't do in actual life, I could do in fiction' (Int. 1.)

Utilising the novel format, McGregor produces fictional parties that represent idealised events that are based on the best of her experiences. The first 'section' of *chemical palace* follows lesbian couple, traffic and Billy, and their gay friend, Holmes, as they search for venues and prepare to host an upcoming dance party. The novel also briefly mentions previous parties that the characters produced in the years before Panic. Held in the heart of Sydney's gay inner-city ghetto, Panic involves months of preparation as the characters generate decorations, costumes and performances, and promote the event. Significant sections of the narrative are devoted to describing the processes involved in organising the novel's four main dance parties. This means that when Panic is successful the reader shares in the characters' sense of celebration and triumph. Davidson defines these parties as 'bacchanalian events fuelled ... by drugs', alluding also to their 'ritualistic' importance, and explaining that they provide a space for the expression of 'forms of identity predicated on non-normative erotic practices (somasochism, 'kink', promiscuity)...' (140). McGregor's character, Slip, describes Panic as 'a room full of misfits who all seemed to be in love, the props the lights the shows, what shows. And most of all the music' (73). For McGregor's characters, the decorations, costumes and performances (usually sexualised and intensely corporeal) are vital in creating this new space in a world where nothing pre-existing satisfies their needs and desires. Through performance and artifice, the nightclub becomes a place of cultural creation and evolution. Slip says:

We fled suburban banality and places beyond for innercity chaos, saw our salvation in the subterranean nightlife. ... We partied, we took drugs, we dressed up and danced. (167)

McGregor often uses these short first-person character monologues, no longer than a few pages, to communicate her messages in the novel. Slip's monologues in particular offer insight into the philosophical and political concerns of the scene, and are reminiscent of a manifesto. More than any other character in the novel, Slip speaks for the collective, confidently using the term 'we'. This and other communal statements in the novel express common goals and political viewpoints, while allowing for the diversity that characterises the radical queer scene. The tone is not didactic; Slip says simply that they 'partied, [they] took drugs, [they] dressed up and danced', making no overt value judgements about the lifestyle. This subtle approach is unusual in manifestos, which usually exhibit direct self-assured statements of opinion and strong language (consider the SCUM Manifesto). However, this matter-of-fact language and gentle tone is effective in the novel format as it permits the reader ample space to interpret the ideas presented and events described for themselves. Through the wise use of character monologues to communicate manifesto-style statements, which are counter-balanced with lyrical third person narrative, McGregor is able to effectively tell the story of the scene she worked and played in for many years, without appearing too biased or self-righteous.

Sydney's radical queer scene in the 1990s is painted (both in McGregor's novel and in primary materials of the period) as a haven for artists, costume-makers, DJs and performers whose work was unwelcome or unrecognised in the mainstreams of their fields. It also serves a 'home' for artists who choose not to participate in the mainstream because they are adverse to the commercialisation of their work, or the perceived homogenisation and sanitising of art and culture. These are issues that McGregor has faced in many contexts, including as a performer in SenVoodoo, and rallied against in her installation protest piece at the Australian

Museum of Contemporary Art in 2007. The artist describes the event on her blog (*the art life*, 2007):

On Sunday 25th November I staged an interventionist performance at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney. 'Dead Art' was a protest about the absence of live performance art in the MCA, one of Australia's foremost contemporary art institutions. ... Dressed in curatorial black, tagged like a morgue corpse, I lay on the floor in one of the galleries until I was forcibly removed by the NSW Police. I chose the Contemporary Australian Art show as the exhibition in which to display my dead body. (n. pag.)

McGregor uses the character of Billy to communicate frustration about the conservative world of art and fashion. Billy is a talented costume-maker and fashion designer, who dreams of one day getting into something 'bigger', such as designing theatre sets or doing costuming for films (33). Billy tells traffic how the hopes and dreams she held for her career were soured when she was told by university bureaucrats to remove non-mainstream fashion parades with which she had been involved from her resume when applying to do Masters. As a result of this censorship of what Billy perceived as 'really *good* things' (original emphasis), Billy abandons postgraduate study in fashion, turning her skills, passion and talent to alternative mostly amateur applications, such as making outfits and decorations for dance parties (9). The Chemical Palace is a space in which marginalised artists, promoters and musicians are able to share and explore eclectic and socially-critical visions. Unlike mainstream arenas of fashion and culture, which are driven by economic rationalist principles and competition, The Chemical Palace represents a culture of *affirmation*, where cooperation takes the place of competition, and diverse multiplicity triumphs over homogenised monopoly. The relationship between The Chemical Palace and questions of capital and commodification form a later part of this chapter.

McGregor's queer

For participants in the radical queer scene, aesthetic diversity and cultural production are natural bedfellows. Audiences are always on the lookout for something new and different, and are not easily shocked. The activities people participate in, as well as the aesthetics, are in a symbiotic relationship to queer ethos upon which the scene is built: the lifestyles spring from the politics and the politics is then shaped by the lifestyles, and so on. In the radical queer context, liberationist ideals of fluid sexuality and the 'right' to self-expression are dominant, although they are often implicitly understood rather than overtly articulated. McGregor's characters do not always explicitly convey liberationist ideals, but these ideals form the ideological foundation underpinning The Chemical Palace. British writer, Peter Tatchell (*Gay Times*, 2004), remembers the radicalism and creativity of the gay liberationist movement in the United Kingdom:

The formation of the Gay Liberation Front in London in 1970 was, arguably, the beginning of the modern movement for queer human rights in Britain. Together with thousands of other gays and lesbians, I was part of GLF's queer uprising. ... GLF did not plead for reform; it demanded change. Feisty, radical and uncompromising, our goal was the transformation of straight society. GLF set the agenda for all the gains of the last three decades. (n. pag.)

Tatchell explains that gay liberationists rejected 'the family' as a patriarchal 'prison' and argued for:

... creating a new sexual democracy, without homophobia, misogyny, racism and class privilege. Erotic shame and guilt would be banished, together with compulsory

monogamy, the nuclear family, and rigid male and female gender roles. There would be sexual freedom and human rights for everyone – gay, bi and straight. Our message was ‘innovate, don’t assimilate’. (n. pag.)

The Gay Liberationist movement, famously ‘sparked off’ by the Stonewall riots in New York in 1969, was characterised by radical and uncompromising politics and direct action and protest. However, unlike Socialist movements, Gay Liberationism had its roots in the social sphere – in night clubs and performance venues particularly – and this lent a creative edge to the type of protest action favoured by the movement. Tatchel says:

GLF’s unique style of political campaigning was ‘protest as performance’. Theatrical, imaginative, camp, daring and witty, it promoted the queer rights message in entertaining ways that caught people’s attention. There were spirited agitprop media stunts and street theatre spectacles, like the raid on Harley Street in protest at the ‘psycho Nazis’ in the psychiatric profession who said homosexuality was a mental illness. (n. pag.)

Fundamental liberationist ideals of sexual freedom and challenge to authority meet ‘irreverence and fluidity’, as well as the ‘heightened sense of theatre, and vulgarity’ that bloomed in the ‘era of AIDS’, to create the radical queer nightclub culture represented in *chemical palace* (McGregor Int. 2.). This mix of ideology and an edgy, sexualised camp aesthetic is summarised by Trash Vaudeville, a principal performer on the Sydney scene, in his description of a share-household:

This young household was a mix of girls and boys, homo and hetro but predominately bent as! We were a gang of eight flatmates plus the extra numbers of household friends, when we all went out together truth is we had difficulty getting let into venues all together. Feral freaky looks were not yet in fashion, coloured hair and glam garb complimented with piercings and the like were still considered to [sic] trashy, aggressive shouts of f@#%ing freaks were not uncommon, I remember being reviled as ‘street trash’. The club scene door people did not know how to interpret our looks and genuinely queer sensibility. So the predominately gay male venues would not want to let in the girls amongst us, and vice versa at predominately women’s venues. The one place we could all go and where we felt welcome and accepted was at the Wicked Women club nights and events. (Int., 2007. N. pag.⁸)

The kind of communal household that Trash Vaudeville describes was common in the 1990s, especially among the young queers who often moved from small towns or suburbs where they felt ‘out of place’ or suffered rejection and abuse. These households would become a new family for these young people and often took the form of shared warehouse living, as in the novel. While warehouse living was much more common in 1990s than it is in the year 2010, the arrangement was not a mainstream practice. Large groups of young people mostly succeeded in applying for run-down properties only and, on the whole, landlords just tolerated these arrangements. Furthermore, as described in the novel, tenants in communal households were often evicted when the landlord has raised enough money to renovate the property. (This still occurs in Sydney, especially in the old run-down terrace houses in the inner-Western Suburbs.) Radical queer identification and queer (rather than gay) social spaces, such as those described by Trash Vaudeville, were not common in 1990s. As he explains, it was difficult for a ‘motley crew’ such as his (drawn together by their ideals, aesthetic preferences and marginality – not because they share labels of gender or sexuality) to find welcome in straight or gay communities.

⁸ Interview conducted with Trash Vaudeville is provided at Attachment 3.

Definitions of 'queer' have been debated and developed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, Annamarie Jagose and others, and debate continues on its theoretical applications. Sedgwick asserts that '[t]he dividing up of all sexual acts – indeed all persons – under the 'opposite' categories of 'homo' and 'hetero' is not a natural given but a historical process, still incomplete today and ultimately impossible but characterized by potent contradictions and explosive effects' (xvi). In her book, *Queer Theory* (Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 1996), Jagose provides a working definition:

Broadly speaking, queer describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire. Resisting that model of stability – which claims heterosexuality as its origin, when it is more properly its effect – queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire. Institutionally, queer has been associated most prominently with lesbian and gay subjects, but its analytic framework also includes such topics as cross-dressing, hermaphroditism, gender ambiguity and gender-corrective surgery. Whether as transvestite performance or academic deconstruction, queer locates and exploits the incoherencies in those three terms which stabilise heterosexuality. Demonstrating the impossibility of any 'natural' sexuality, it calls into question even such apparently unproblematic terms as 'man' and 'woman'. (3)

While I do not necessarily support all of her assertions, Jagose's broad definition of queer is sufficient for this project. I am not interested here in furthering the dialogue on how queer should or should not be defined. I am concerned with queer predominantly as a *functional* term that describes a seminal aspect of the community and characters of *chemical palace*: that they interrogate, *play with* and/or resist binaries (man/woman, gay/straight, top/bottom) in their daily activities (consciously and unconsciously) and subvert and destabilise categories of sexuality. Historically, queer constructions of sexuality in the 'postmodern era' were a departure from the leftist liberationist movements of the 1970s. Jagose explains that 'queer is, in part, a response to perceived limitations in the liberationist and identity-conscious politics of the gay and lesbian feminist movements' (130). However, what queer means academically may not be what it means to those who identify with the term. Jagose explains the academic construction of queer thusly:

Queer, then, is an identity category that has no interest in consolidating or even stabilising itself. It maintains its critique of identity-focused movements by understanding that even the formation of its own coalitional and negotiated constituencies may well result in exclusionary and reifying effects far in excess of those intended. (131)

However, in queer communities (the term 'community' is problematic in this context and is interrogated later in this chapter) and queer social scenes, participants often do align themselves with queer as an identity. While it means different thing to different people, unlike 'lesbian' and 'gay', most people would agree that 'queer' encompasses much more than just sexual preference and is a significantly more inclusive concept. Describing her personal ideals about sexuality and sexual identification, McGregor says:

I am old-fashioned in my terminology. 'Straight' to me means square in the beatnik sense of the word. And I 'prefer women'. Nothing more solid than that. A radical or progressive space has that ethos behind it. It wouldn't question the gender of my partner. It has no expectations, and no rules, but it is actually a very ethical place to be – much more than a mainstream one – for these very reasons - ie, intrinsic to real mutual respect is giving your fellow humans the space to evolve in any way they need to, no matter how unexpected. The ethics contain individual freedom within communal harmony – you can't have one without the other. (Int. 2.)

The scenes that characterise *The Chemical Palace* are commonly referred to as ‘mixed queer space’ to differentiate them from gay and lesbian social spaces. Events often have a male or female *focus* in their theme, even a somewhat gay focus (usually communicated through imagery, performances and advertising for the event) but all events on the radical queer scene welcome a mixed-gender and mixed-sexuality crowd and overtly celebrate diversity. At one of these events, for example, a girl-boy couple would not be reviled for expressing their (hetero)sexuality in public, as they often are in gay bars. Trash Vaudeville’s, and McGregor’s, constructions of queer are echoed in publications from the 1990s:

Queer Power Now. Queer means to fuck with gender. There are straight queers, bi queers, tranny queers, lez queers, fag queers, SM queers, fisting queers in every single street in this country of ours. We are dyke queers with a taste for dissent. (*Dis-ease* 3 2)

For the purposes of this study, then, the notion of queer takes in a spectrum of sexualities and genders and abandons the focus on labelling the individual, preferring to see genders and sexualities as always in motion and always potentially changeable. Diversity, and the deconstruction of gender stereotypes and traditional gender roles, is revered in the extreme. Perhaps most importantly, participants in *The Chemical Palace* also play with these labels and categories in a humorous fashion.

In the novel, a queer sensibility is communicated in the characters’ preferences. Slip describes feeling ‘more comfortable’ at punk parties than gay or lesbian events because ‘there were kids with coloured hair and piercings, the sex in the air [was] going in any direction, the music [was] more experimental’ (81). This one sentence identifies three areas where queer and radical sensibilities and preferences attract and motivate a character over their sexual preference. Firstly, in the area of style and aesthetics: Slip enjoys being around people who dress in a style like herself. Secondly, in the area of sexual preference and coupling: Slip prefers a space where sexual couplings are more *random and unpredictable than in the mainstream gay and lesbian venues*. Thirdly, in the area of performance and artistic output: Slip identifies with the music in the punk venues more than the commercialised pop and dance music being played in the gay bars. The preferences of McGregor’s characters frequently demonstrate a ‘transfiguring motion across categories’ that, according to Davidson, characterises Sedgwick’s construction of queer as denoting movements across categories and/or genres (148). In the context of *The Chemical Palace*, the ‘crossing’ of genres – of style, music, fashion and politics – represents a ‘queering’ of gay culture, and that is why the novel describes non-radical gays as ‘straight gays’ (44). In the novel, queerness relates more to ideals and practices than to sexual orientation. The queer culture in *chemical palace* is inclusive and playful: it does not cast judgement on sexual acts or roles, such as ‘butch’ and ‘femme’, even if some theory would posit this dichotomy as regressive. Rather than being a reference to sexual acts or roles, McGregor’s ‘straight gays’ are not so much those who refuse to engage in radical sexual acts, but those queers who hide their sexual lives, live conservative lifestyles and uphold the social and political status quo. McGregor uses ‘straight’ in the beatnik sense of the word, denoting social conservatism, capitalist capitulation and political and creative apathy.

This queer sensibility enjoyed popularity in inner-city Sydney queer ‘ghettos’ throughout the 1990s, as captured in publications such as *Wicked Women* and *Hell Bent*. *Wicked Women* 2.6 (1991) features the article ‘Kinky Galore interviewed by Madonna’, where the writer takes on an alter-ego to interview the Sydney-based performance troupe (26). In the article, the interviewer offers a rough definition of ‘queer’, and expresses passionate

enthusiasm for queer lifestyles, promoting Kinky Galore's performances in which 'genderfuck [presents] a positive confrontation to straight, mainstream morality' (13). 'Genderfuck' means to play with and subvert accepted gender roles and presentations, usually in performance or dress. It arose as a comment on drag performance and often involves similar costuming processes, but diverges in its radical and often political agenda. Drag usually involves a transformation of the gender presentation (most often temporarily) of an individual 'from one gender to the other', and is predicated on the idea that there are two genders. Conversely, 'genderfuck' is performance invested in breaking-down the dichotomies of gender, perverting and distorting expected visual and behavioural traditions of the two genders, and creating radical multi-gendered, gender/less or ambiguously-gendered images and personas.

McGregor demonstrates 'genderfuck' in numerous performances and costumes in *chemical palace*, with one of the most interesting examples being traffic's decision to dress in masculine garb and wear a strap-on dildo in her pants while working as a 'glassie' in a male-dominated bar on Sydney's Oxford Street (55). Upon realising that traffic is biologically female, some of the gay male clientele are 'disturbed to anger' at having been drawn-into the illusion, flirting with traffic because they thought she was male (55). McGregor's characters see gender dichotomies as a sphere of play and a space for experimentation. Far from wanting to erase gender, they embrace its performative components and utilise them in various performances and dance floor parodies, particularly those of the party Hotel Quickie (187-190). Gender, with all of its trappings and decoration, is a fertile bed of inspiration for the characters' art. Holmes and traffic's 'hooker performance' at Hotel Quickie is a prime example of the novel's playfully critical approach to gender stereotypes and sexual relations (189). The prostitute flirts with the audience, playing up to the stereotype of an attractive and sexual female. The confident and dominating male directs her to her knees to give him oral sex, and she obliges, undoing his zipper. The 'hooker' pulls out the head of the prosthetic penis, which is grotesquely oversized, and takes it in her mouth. She then walks across the stage, dragging out the rest of the prosthetic – a long pink satin shaft – while the client writhes in ecstasy. There are numerous possible interpretations of this symbolism. The grotesquely oversized penis could be seen as a parody of male egotism and self-obsession, and a critique of the 'worship' of the penis. On the other hand, the image can be seen as reinforcing the worship of the penis, and the performance is definitely designed to titillate. The performances of *chemical palace* frequently present ambivalent politics, and different audience members would interpret them in different ways. The conclusion of this particular performance is less ambiguous:

The show ended with the hooker pulling it from the client's trousers altogether and arranging it around her shoulders like a feather boa. And as the client lay back on the bed in ecstatic agony, the decorated hooker sauntered offstage. (189)

In this action, the prostitute is empowered and the penis is divulged of its 'masculine' power and transformed into a 'feminine' object – an object traditionally associated with glamour and high-femininity. The feather boa is also an object that has come to be associated with drag performance, so this connection would also most likely be drawn by a queer audience.

Debates raged around the issue of capitulation to gender stereotypes and gender roles in the 1990s and these debates were captured in the small-press publications of the scene. For example, in 1994 when the 'Lesbian Space Project' was determining its 'rules for inclusion', the editors of *Dis-ease* (3) encouraged their readership of 'sex-radical dykes' to protest against discrimination in the lesbian community against 'gender fluid/non-gender specific people' and women who were involved in BDSM (bondage, discipline and sado-masochism) and radical

sexual practises (22). The disagreement was generally between radical feminists and the radical queer cohort around questions of gender-capitulation and women's oppression. The radical queer scene, while diverse, consisted of more sex-radical feminists who were in strong disagreement with the anti-pornography stances of Catharine MacKinnon, Andrea Dworkin, Robin Morgan and Dorchen Leidholdt. Radical feminists often argued against the inclusion of male-to-female transsexuals in women-only spaces, but radical queers generally argued for more inclusive rules. Debates were common between sex-radical queer women – who both embraced *and* subverted gender stereotypes – and the more 'hard-core' feminists, who generally argued that any performance of traditional gender roles was oppressive to women. Some radical feminists also reviled BDSM as a performance of women's oppression. In contrast to this, sex-positive commentators, such as Camille Paglia, Ellen Willis, Susie Bright, Patrick Califia, Gayle Rubin, Carol Queen, Avedon Carol, Tristan Taormino, and Betty Dodson argued more liberal lines around personal empowerment and choice. While McGregor is aligned with the radical sex-positive queers in respect to these issues, she does not largely take up this argument in the novel, saving her real criticism for 'big business' and the corporate world, and the growing conservatism of Australian society. My analysis of McGregor's queer politics concludes with these somewhat inconclusive statements: While it is crucial that readers see queer identity and sexuality as a kind of back-bone in the novel, the author herself refuses to define what that means, or even to present a stable representation of queer individuality – in *The Chemical Palace* it can be no other way. To try to define queer any further would begin to limit and exclude, and this is not 'in the spirit' of radical queer dance party culture, which embraces all who seek its communal aim – a reckless pursuit of fabulousness⁹.

Defining The Chemical Palace

One of the greatest strengths of McGregor's novel is her ability to describe the scene and its dance parties in a style that is entertaining and accessible while not being overly-dramatic or romanticised. Readers are encouraged to see events from a variety of viewpoints through McGregor's combination of short first-person character monologues, written like streams of consciousness or transcribed interviews, and her sections of third-person narrative. In the third-person sections, the narrative perspective switches from one character to the next, giving the novel its truly communal feel. The previously quoted section of third-person narration, centred on Slip's perspective, paints a wonderfully vivid picture of the crowd at Panic:

She remembered the salient moments of beauty and absurdity. The Indonesian waiter in schoolgirl drag at her first Sydney dance party, awestruck, in heaven. The beautiful couple in corsets who shared a joint with her, all the friendly poofters. At five am when cigarettes were scarce, the compulsory drag in the toilets with a queue of dykes to her forty pack of Horizon. A room full of misfits who all seemed to be in love, the props the lights the shows, what shows. And most of all the music. (73)

Here, McGregor uses the perspective of one of her main characters to give readers a sense of the random beauty and fleeting connections that characterise these events. These fleeting interactions underpin the ethos of the scene itself, where community is contingent and 'by choice'. The novel captures and promotes a utopic view of the dance party of the 1990s, whilst also divulging the author's cynicism toward it, her awareness that, as McGregor herself says:

⁹ *The Reckless Pursuit of Fabulousness* is a zine produced by Ali Habberfield of Newtown, Sydney, in 2004. Its subject matter is dressing up, clubbing and queer sex.

‘it is an idealised view of dance party culture. It’s what it CAN be, not what it often ends up as – something sadly plastic and banal...’ (Int. 1.)

In the relatively small but revealing collection of reviews published about *chemical palace*, readers encounter assorted levels of cynicism directed towards the novel’s positive representation of drug use and party culture, as well as McGregor’s romantic or nostalgic portrayal of Sydney in the era. The more negative reviews largely fail to comment on McGregor’s writing, focussing more on deriding the book’s subjects. Despite this, even fairly critical reviews of the novel provide useful material towards a definition of The Chemical Palace. For instance, while I disagree with his occasionally patronising tone, James Ley’s review of *chemical palace* for the *Sydney Morning Herald* (2002) is useful, as it succinctly summarises some of the features of the radical queer party scene. Ley describes the parties presented in the novel as ‘events requiring months of preparation: cathartic Bacchanalian rituals powered by cutting-edge dance music and incorporating elements of fantasy and theatre’ (par. 3.). He also refers, poignantly I think, to the group of people involved as a ‘network’. Ley’s appreciation of the significance of dance parties, and his allusion to the events as ‘ritual’, redeem his review, which in other parts demonstrates a negative and fatalistic attitude towards dance party culture:

There are a number of factors at work against the illusion. The drugs that are an essential part of the group catharsis also pull in the other direction: towards solipsism, increasingly antisocial compulsion and diminishing returns. There is the spectre of disease. The shifting demographics of the city do their bit. And then there’s the simple fact of getting older. (par. 5)

In a lot of writing about the dance party and ‘rave’ scenes of the 1990s and early 2000s, writers adopt a tone saturated with ennui as they announce the ‘death’ of the ‘illusion’ of connection and innovation that rave culture promised its young participants (see Brabzon, 2002 and Mattesi, 2004). Commentators generally suggest that the ‘promise’ of rave culture was not realised; that the dream of a utopian alternative to capitalist individualism was a failure¹⁰. McGregor does not share this view and did not intend her novel to promote it (*Mixing the Lit*, 2004). Drugs are not presented in the novel as the ‘path to transcendence’ or as a panacea for alienation. Characters use them in diverse ways and for differing reasons, some of which relate to the pursuit of pleasure or quasi-spiritual highs, and some of which don’t. For example, in *chemical palace* drugs are often taken to give organisers enough energy to complete the work involved in putting on these elaborate parties. The novel is unique in that its focus is not primarily on the drug-taking and transcendent dance floor moments that characterise most popular representations of dance party culture, but on the preparation and background to the events. In *chemical palace*, McGregor has attempted to demystify and demythologise the dance party, conveying its banalities alongside its glories. Some reviewers of the novel fail to consider the events described as more than escapist individualised hedonistic indulgence. It is not unreasonable to hope that *chemical palace* may help readers to understand what goes into creating the kind of energetic and vital culture that characterised the radical queer scene in 1990s, but this is only possible if readers resist the tendency to apply the popular stereotypes of 1990s rave culture to the novel.

McGregor is at pains to set these events apart from mainstream and commercial manifestations of dance party, and she devotes much of the novel to establishing the ethics and

¹⁰ The question of whether the dance party is ‘dead’ is discussed in Chapter 7.

socio-political behaviours of participants and organisers. Ley's review explores some of the functions of radical dance party culture that differentiate it from the commercial scene:

... what McGregor is attracted to is the energy and artistry that goes into creating the spectacle. Her characters take their fun very seriously indeed, and there is in fact a creative philosophy that emerges from their efforts. Most of the characters are referred to by nicknames – Slip, Shifty, the perennially uncapitalised traffic – and many of them have several aliases; all are, to a greater or lesser extent, anxious to reinvent themselves and escape the horror of an ordinary existence. (par. 4)

Elucidating a few of the novel's central themes, such as personal and communal reinvention, and 'serious play', Ley's review offers more valuable insight than its condescending and superior tone would suggest. His statement that a philosophy emerges from the events is misleading. In fact, the events emerge from the philosophy, then in turn contribute to the changing of that philosophy, and so on. Furthermore, the fun *is* very serious, particularly for those who organise these parties. The parties incorporate economies of creativity, politics, culture and community, art and self-expression. The word 'fun' is too dismissive and simplistic to capture what is happening in these radical queer spaces, and the use of the sarcastic 'perennially uncapitalised' and 'horror of an ordinary existence' belittle the processes. Ley touches on but does not expand the importance, for the scene's participants, of creating a space in which they can express and explore their sexualities, identities and politics. He also comments flippantly on McGregor's inclusion of numerous sex scenes in the novel, saying: '[t]here is sex, too, of course – lots of it. And drugs.' This dismissive off-hand quip about sex and drugs belies the fact that they are primary and imperative themes of the novel. Ley is also flippant about the significant themes of disease and death, and his tone suggests an insensitivity to the fact that for many queer people, an 'ordinary existence' *can* be 'horror'. The characters in *chemical palace* don't seek to create an alternative culture 'on a whim', their passionate activities are a reaction to a society where inclusion is predicated on heteronormativity – a society that often excludes or actively demonises queers, especially 'freaky' queers. Being a typical example of the kinds of reviews written about *chemical palace*, Ley's appraisal describes certain features of the narrative sufficiently but fails to give due consideration to the complexity of the novel's philosophies, or to the politics of *chemical palace*.

What are the politics of *The Chemical Palace* and, by extension, McGregor's novel? What defines the radical queer dance party scene as 'alternative'? What sets these events apart from mainstream dance parties and nightclubs, such as the larger Mardi Gras parties and gay 'superclubs' like Sydney's Arq Nightclub in Darlinghurst? I have identified four principal criteria that exemplify the nightclub settings and events of *The Chemical Palace*. While these criteria are not fixed or absolute they serve as an introduction to radical queer dance party culture, explicate its difference to more mainstream gay and lesbian scenes, and gesture towards a definition. These elements are: interactivity, the lack of a profit-motive, a progressive, rogue political 'flavour', and a grotesque camp aesthetic. The first crucial element that delineates *The Chemical Palace* is the interactivity of its events: a radical queer dance party space encourages, and makes room for, the meaningful involvement of participants. It is a cultural space that promotes active participation rather than passive consumption, generally demonstrating conscious efforts to break-down the binaries of performer/audience and public/private. The divide between friends and strangers is also challenged. The second crucial element is anti-commercialism and a lack of focus on profit: the ethos of *The Chemical Palace* encompasses a self-conscious opposition to economic rationalist ideals, and events very rarely include a profit-motive or the profiteering of any group or individual. In fact, particularly in

the 1990s when HIV and AIDS were considered to be at ‘crisis’ point in Sydney, most of the money made by queer events (when they made any money) was directed towards community advocacy, and given to welfare organisations devoted to helping people affected by the disease (McGregor Int. 2.). The third element of radical queer culture and events is a rogue – radical, progressive, and/or left-wing – political flavour, or undercurrent: this is manifested in the aesthetics, attitudes and statements made by performers, the costuming and decoration, and the promotional material and themes of the events. The fourth, somewhat ephemeral but crucial element that is common to all manifestations of radical queer culture (past and present) is the proliferation of unconventional artifice, evident in extreme costuming and creative displays that encompass the sexual, the abject, violence and/or aspects of the grotesque. Together, these elements provide a working definition for The Chemical Palace, as both a cultural space that manifests a particular and continuing radical queer ethos and, concurrently, as a historically-specific cultural and artistic ‘movement’ of which McGregor’s characters are fictional members.

Interactivity

In the following extract, McGregor expresses her frustration with the ever-increasing number of rules imposed on ‘consumers’ in night-time leisure spaces:

NO dancing.
NO smoking.
NO drugs.
NO open-toed shoes.
NO nudity.
NO bodily fluids.
NO penetration.

Drinking.
Gambling. (355)

What is offered to punters in most nightclubs and pubs is an extremely limited possibility of participation. Consumers are encouraged as much as possible *not* to interact in unconventional ways with each other or their environment. Poker machines are the perfect expression of this tendency, encouraging individuals to spend their money in a quiet and predictable way. The events and spaces of The Chemical Palace offer an antidote to this sterilised social sphere. Interactivity is a feature common to all cultural products from Sydney’s radical queer scene in 1990s as well as McGregor’s novel. The novel tells us that in preparing the bacchanalian party events ‘[e]verybody lent a hand. Bee and Bella offered to dress up and hand out lollies, the boys offered to do a show and Shifty in her green Mazda Esmerelda drove Billy out to Rosebery where an old cable place threw away their rubbish already sorted’ (56). Antithetical to mainstream commercial dance parties, in which promoters and performers (usually professionals) plan and orchestrate an event to which ‘the public’ (consumers) can purchase tickets, radical queer dance party events encourage interested parties to contribute: participants utilise their skills and resources in the lead-up to and during parties, ultimately leading to a sense of ownership over the event. Some of the performers in *chemical palace* also challenge the divide between audience and performer by abandoning the stage entirely and performing among the members of the crowd: the ‘show’ where the performers emerge from three ‘body-bags’ placed among the dancers on the floor is a prime example (59). Davidson also highlights the novel’s statement that, for the participants ‘performance was life itself’ (27), explaining that ‘the parties provide a focus on and a vehicle for various modes of performance’ (140). In

the 1990s, *Wicked Women* magazine encouraged contribution from any member of the queer and lesbian communities, and the producers of the magazine also hosted events, such as the annual Wicked Women Dance Party and annual Ms Wicked Competition, which featured a Mr Wicked section in its final year. These events provided a public space for the enunciation of a radical queer ethos that was underpinned by egalitarian and non-consumerist ideals. Competitions such as those held by *Wicked Women* in the 1990s have a profoundly empowering impact on participants and are catalyst for political, social and theoretical debate. They are uniquely complex cultural sites, where culture and community is at once expressed, altered, challenged, reinforced, enjoyed and reinvented. The active participation of individuals in these 'various modes of performance' means that interactivity remains the cornerstone of manifestations of radical nightclub culture today.

A non-consumerist hedonism

The early rave ethos has been characterised as a non-egotistical creation and appreciation of music shared by DJs, promoters and clubbers; an evangelical passion for the potential of the empathogenic ecstasy; and an egalitarian desire to dance, socialise and have fun for young women and men from across the social spectrum. (Measham 337)

While dance party culture grew out of a reaction against capitalist alienation and greed, common criticism of dance parties, clubs and dance culture maintains that they are 'hedonistic' and dangerous. Georgina Gold (*Sydney Institute Quarterly* 4.3, 2000) claims that Australian mainstream misconceptions about dance parties can be attributed to negative media coverage; 'from Anna Wood (15 year old ecstasy victim) to Happy Valley (summer dance party where a 26 year old man died)' (10). The sensationalised media spin on the death of Anna Wood in particular began to breed a culture of fear around recreational drug use and 'techno-culture', in which the truth about the relatively-low levels of danger associated with the use of ecstasy (MDMA) fell victim to a campaign of mythological proportions (Gold 10). In her 2004 study of drug use and dance spaces, Fiona Measham explains:

The original British acid house and rave scene developed out of, as an extension of and as a backlash against the increasingly individualistic and materialistic enterprise culture of the 'Thatcherite' 1980s. In this way, the antecedents of rave in 1980s materialism resulted in its characterisation as both an anti-commercial utopian egalitarianism (Garratt, 1998; Newcombe, 1991; Presdee, 2000; Reynolds, 1998) and an apolitical escapist hedonism for suburban youth (Kohn, 1997; Rietveld, 1993). (338)

Measham exposes that neither of these contradictory attitudes to the dance party phenomenon sufficiently capture its complexity. Dance party culture is sorely 'misunderstood' as a form of youth culture (Measham 339; Measham, Parker and Aldridge 11-13), often being incorrectly identified as more dangerous than pub culture (Gold 11-12; Measham, Parker and Aldridge 13). An in-depth study published by Measham et al. in 1998 looked at patterns of drug use across time for young people in the United Kingdom (aged 17-25) and found that, while there had been a significant increase in the use of 'dance drugs', cannabis was still by far the most commonly used illicit drug, and that, despite the wide use of dance drugs, 'there [we]re few indications of problematic or dependent drug use in proportion to the scale of recreational drug use in Britain' (13-14). The authors express concern that media misrepresentation of dance party drugs, and the resulting *criminalisation* of young people and their cultural spaces, can only hamper efforts to keep young people safe and healthy (13).

The prominence of clubbing and drug taking on gay and lesbian social scenes also inspires heated debate, as explored in Davidson's article 'Liberation, Commodity Culture and Community in 'The Golden Age of Promiscuity'' (*Australian Humanities Review*, 2001). Some gay and lesbian social commentators characterise the gay club scene, sex-venues and night-spots as a 'cess pit' of capitalist consumption and an orgy of drugs and 'meaningless' sex (see Davidson 'Golden' paras. 3,4,7 and Race *Pleasure* 20). Both Davidson and Race dispute the idea proposed by liberationists such as Denis Altman that the leisure scene represents nothing more than an apolitical escape from the horrors of homophobia (Davidson para. 3). Douglas Crimp (2004) is also sharply critical of queer commentators that cross the line into expressing moralism against other queers, exposing a disturbing minority of gay men who have turned to conservatism as a response to the devastations of HIV and AIDS (*Melancholia* 12). Crimp is angered by the conservative gay writer, Andrew Sullivan, who identifies a plague of 'sexual pathologies' afflicting gay men, causing them to have 'too many sexual partners' (12). Sullivan's vitriol against the 'abattoirs' of gay male (casual) sexual activity are also extended to clubbing and drug-taking, which he characterises as escapist and 'anesthetized' (Sullivan *Love Undetectable*, qtd. in Crimp 12). To blame the spread of HIV and AIDS on gay nightclub culture is ridiculous, incorrect and counterproductive to the aim of promoting safety, and to suggest that people involved in drug-taking and/or radical or casual sexual activity somehow *deserve* to get AIDS is sickening and upsetting. Unfortunately, this view is still common. As an alternative, Race's eminent book, *Pleasure Consuming Medicine* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2009), offers productive ideas and vocabulary for mapping the complex relationships between pleasure, drug use, sex and community (20-31)¹¹.

McGregor's novel actively promotes a unique kind of hedonism that is best understood as overtly anti-consumerist. Self-consciously opposed to capitalist consumer culture and the 'big business' leisure industry, The Chemical Palace can be seen as another, and yet different, manifestation of rave or doof culture. Graham St John's collection *FreeNRG: notes from the edge of the dance floor* (Altona: Common Ground, 2001), is a volume of writings by academics, freelance writers, musicians and artists who share a passion for doofs, which are dance parties held in outdoor places, such as the bush, on a beach or in the desert. St John's project details the productive and progressive outcomes of doof events, which spawn a culture intent on satisfying a profound perceived need for a space in modern society where people can enjoy meaningful self-expression and rewarding communal celebration (xvii). Dissatisfied with the perceived alienation of modern consumer society, participants in progressive political movements have frequently sought to create their own leisure cultures. Similarly to radical queers, socialists and anarchists have expressed rejection of the commercialisation of fun and human interaction that characterises modern leisure culture. However, the social and cultural events created by these groups as an alternative to consumerist leisure culture can often be characterised as politically 'serious' or 'dry', and lack the emphasis on personal and sexual freedom and 'edgy' artistic expression that radical dance culture promotes. Doof culture shares with radical queer nightclub culture a dedication to 'build[ing] the experience of pleasure (ecstasy, rapture, sexual pleasure) into its program for cultural therapy', but diverges in its focus on the natural environment and environmental issues (St John xv). Conversely, The Chemical Palace tends to be an urban scene, with its political focus being on sexuality and gender as well as reclaiming urban space. Despite this divergence, the doof is still the closest cousin to the scene described in McGregor's *chemical palace*, because they share similar goals of pleasure and freedom, as well as possessing these common attributes: a refusal of the profit

¹¹ Race's book, Davidson's article and Crimp's article are discussed in depth in Chapter 7.

motive; the creation of a culture of inclusivity; resistance of authority; reclaiming of public space; and the pursuit of joy and transcendence, among others. Although doof culture would be widely considered 'queer friendly', sexuality is not a prominent issue in its program, as it is at a radical queer event. Radical queer performance and cultural production frequently contains criticism of other progressive movements for their relatively conservative attitude to sex and the body. So, while there are political similarities between radical queer dance parties and doofs, and even anarchist social events, the project of exploring gender, sexuality, the body and disease is central only to radical queer culture.

In her article in *Sheltered lives* (*Heat* 11), on her then in-progress novel, *Indelible Ink* (published in 2010), McGregor says:

It seems easy to blame religion for our hang-ups about body. Scratch the surface of many a leftist liberal, and you will find the same prudishness, the same moral outrage about issues of the body as you find in the religious or political right. (222)

This kind of sexual conservatism is surprisingly common among groups of otherwise left-wing or 'progressive' people, some of whom even perceive the aims of radical queer art and culture to be anti-left, or sexist. Some feminist groups hesitate to support the promotion of radical sexuality, seeing it as a regression of women back into a primarily sexual role. Other left groups see the complex, queer and ambiguously left-wing nature of radical queer subcultures as 'too postmodern', individualist and, ultimately, not left-wing. However, participants challenge conservative upbringings by seeking personal freedom and exploration of sexual selves and sexual possibility; they pursue joy through non-consumerist expressive rituals; and they create a radical and dynamic counter-culture that overtly rejects consumerism and social alienation. Because of their progressive aims, these parties are inherently radical. Davidson reminds us of the complex and multi-faceted 'motivations and returns' of involvement in dance party culture, pointing out that participating in dance party culture helps people to form 'another consciousness and sensibility' (Deleuze and Guattari 17) 'at both the individual and collective levels' (Davidson 144). One of the often-overlooked 'returns' of dance culture is the creation and strengthening of senses of community, as Race explores. In the same way that Mardi Gras (parties and parade) have helped to create and reinforce a sense of shared purpose and fraternity for the broader gay and lesbian community, radical dance parties help to forge networks of likeminded anti-capitalist pro-sex queers.

Motivations vary for McGregor's characters, and the effects of participation in dance party culture are different for each person with each event, but there is a common sense of purpose; a purpose that falls distinctly outside of the rationale of capitalism. When asked why she has been personally involved in putting on parties, McGregor said:

For the same reason we write novels. Folly. Ambition. Vision. Just an uncontrollable urge really. (Int. 2.)

Economic gain is not a significant factor. In *chemical palace*, McGregor's character, Bee, makes this observation, summarising the anti-consumerist ethos shared by members of the radical queer dance party scene:

I'm a bit over mistressing, the truth be known, I'm working now mostly just to pay for my celluloid habit. The arse has fallen out of the industry anyway. In hard times luxuries are the first to go. Funny how sex art and fantasy are the things most people consider luxuries, even if us true believers know the real ones are whitegoods and mortgages. (158)

McGregor's characters posit creating and expressing art, doing and observing performance, dressing up and engaging in dance floor practice, and even (for most of them at some stage)

taking drugs, as necessary components of a fulfilling life, and ‘whitegoods and mortgages’ as the unnecessary (even undesirable) luxuries. We often see the characters working within a barter system (also a common feature of doof culture and environmental activism in general), such as when hairdresser Jimi swaps haircuts with traffic and Billy ‘for two grams of speed’ in the lead-up to Panic (57). A further example is where James tells Slip about ‘droplifting’; the practice of surreptitiously putting your music onto the shelves in music stores to ‘get it out there’ (366). This kind of practice typifies the creative integrity of radical queer cultural producers. Like any artist, they would like to make a living from their art, but more important than that to them is their hunger to make their particular art and share it with the world.

McGregor notes that for most characters in *chemical palace* a genuinely anti-capitalist lifestyle is more of an ideal than an actuality: most characters have ‘straight’ (mainstream) day jobs, some are financially secure, and this complicates but does not negate the anti-consumerist politics of the culture and its satires. The satires of business people and ‘respectable’ professionals that feature in some of the novel’s performances are ‘often self-reflective’ (McGregor Int. 2.). For example, in *chemical palace* the Professor is keenly aware of the irony of his social standing as a university lecturer and delights in subverting this image by engaging in outlawed and clandestine activities, such as drug-taking and anonymous sex. Measham explains that the ‘commercialisation of indoor licensed venues and the criminalisation and/or containment of outdoor and unlicensed raves have removed neither the popularity nor the perceived problem of leisure space’ (344). Satires in the novel reflect and critique this commercialisation on a political level, rather than on the level of the individual. However, the four arguably major characters in the novel – Slip, traffic, Billy and Holmes – all go through periods of poverty, drug-abuse and/or addiction, and sex-work, and have tenuous and unstable financial lives. Also, all of the characters are united by their mutual de-prioritisation of wealth and social status, citing other things as being far more important to them. Slip says:

That was the same as it is now and has ever been. Always the congregation around music and performance, always the need for transcendence and fantasy. ... Partying was our font, our touchstone, it was our main reality. It was the world in which we truly came alive. (167)

McGregor’s dance parties are not simply the places of hedonistic escapism and entertainment that nightclubs are often construed to be, although these components are present and important. They are not simply places to ‘pick up trade’ and just forget the stresses of your everyday life with the help of drugs and a dark dance floor. While all of these things may be going on in the radical dance party space, McGregor’s dance party is also a creative space, a space of work and play, a social and political arena, and a potential vehicle for spiritual and personal transcendence. It is a misleading simplification to construe these complex spaces as simply manifestations of consumerist hedonism. The radical dance party space enables a political dialogue – an ideological and a creative exchange – and this exchange fosters a togetherness through which a strong sense of community can manifest (*Race Pleasure* 22). This aim is dissimilar to the standard aims of economical rationalism, especially those of the leisure industry, where simple ‘entertainment’ is promoted at the expense of politics and meaningful engagement. Leisure culture in the mainstream is generally seen as a-political; it is common to hear people say ‘don’t take it so seriously... it’s just entertainment’. However, in *The Chemical Palace* entertainment is never ‘just entertainment’ – it is politics, art and culture, it is communication, and it is a primary site of radical discourse on identity, sexuality,

politics and lifestyles. The performances at radical dance parties, for example, challenge the community to develop and grow in political and cultural arenas. Entertainment is a very serious business in radical queer nightclub culture, not a form of escapism.

Dance parties and nightclubs are also infamous as spaces in which large amounts of recreational drugs are consumed; most commonly drugs that make you want to dance, such as amphetamines. Drug-taking in the nightclub context is portrayed as particularly hedonistic, failing to attract the relatively favourable reputation of being mind-expanding, like drug-taking in the literary world: Gold points out this hypocrisy, saying 'if Coleridge can do it, why can't we?' (10) The differing attitudes to drug consumption across these contexts are partly due to the different types of drugs consumed, and partly due to the construction of writing as a high-cultural activity and dancing as a low-cultural activity. However, it is also arguable that homophobic distaste towards gay (generally male) sexual activity plays a role in the popular perception of the nightclub as a hedonistic 'speed-fuelled orgy'. While it would be naïve to deny the pivotal role that illicit drugs play in most if not all nightclub scenes, in reality the most commonly consumed drug is always alcohol, a *legal* depressant (Measham 342). Amphetamines are the most recognised group of drugs associated with queer nightclub culture but hallucinogenics are also popular in nightclub scenes, and are featured in McGregor's novel. Nevertheless, McGregor's representation of drug use in *chemical palace* is subordinate to her depiction of the music, performances, and costumes that manifest radical queer culture, and she is critical of the tendency to focus too heavily on drugs. Race also critiques this tendency, which allows the real purpose and effects of dance party activity to be ignored:

The queer dance party is often seen as a sort of mass escape from the realities of queer life, or else as a scene of excessive consumerism. But I want to suggest that it had a series of effects that were less ambiguously productive. If the dance party formed a major source of revenue for community-based organisations, it was also a crucial apparatus within which the notion of community was given popular resonance - indeed became widely imaginable as a viable way of contending with the HIV/AIDS epidemic. (*Pleasure* 20)

Race's construction of the dance party as an apparatus by which 'the community' (in this case the wider gay community) deals with the damage and horrors of HIV and AIDS in the 1990s is certainly useful here. It functions by opening up the concept of communal hedonism to a dialogue around the potential social value of these activities, which are generally only thought of in terms of their social costs.

Race's analysis touches on the more universal and ongoing positive potentials present in communal drug use and dancing but does not discuss the specificities of *radical* queer party culture, or the 'various modes of performance' that Davidson identifies in *chemical palace* (140). McGregor says this of the role of drugs in the scene:

They were intrinsic. It was only rare individuals who never took them. Drugs have always been intrinsic to bacchanalia – whether wine, or acacia, or whatever your poison. They're part of the passage of letting go. (Int. 1.)

Although Race's focus is on mainstream gay and lesbian community dance parties, such as Mardi Gras fundraising parties, and his interest is largely in community responses to HIV and AIDS, he clarifies that 'drugs are important social actors with effects frequently exceeding common assignments of value, harm, effect, and productivity' (20). His analysis hints at the personal and communal potentialities of dance, performance and drug use that McGregor's novel seeks to represent. McGregor claims that *chemical palace* demonstrates 'a range of drug behaviours – addiction through recreational to abstinence' (Int. 1.), but it is arguable that this

focus is secondary to her aim of demonstrating a universal and positive potential of drugs to contribute to cultural creation within a context that is specifically anti-consumerist and community-focussed. The novel unashamedly seeks to pay homage to a bacchanalian culture of drug use and celebration in the context of Sydney's HIV/AIDS 'crisis' which, as Race argues, saw the rise of Australian queer dance party culture as we know it (20-25). If we consider McGregor's inclusion of Nietzsche's meditation on the transformative potential of dance, quoted at the novel's opening, we can see that the author believes that the dance party is at least potentially a vehicle for individual and collective experiences of joy, newness and rebirth. Drugs are just one aspect of the whole.

Returning to Ley's review, we can better understand how it expresses the cynical view held by many critics of dance party culture:

There are a number of factors that work against the illusion [of a collective identity]. The drugs that are an essential part of the group catharsis also pull in the other direction: towards solipsism, increasingly antisocial compulsion and diminishing returns. (para. 5)

Critics of dance party culture often focus their criticisms on the supposedly self-indulgent and destructive role that drugs play in the scene. While it would be naïve to claim that drug use in the scene is always practiced in a healthful and sensible way, it is also reductive to ignore the socially productive role played by drugs in this culture. This social role can be seen in the economies of caring and safety, sharing of specialist knowledge between users, and even the camaraderie that comes from participating in outlawed behaviours. Race's analysis of the role of drugs in solidifying a community facing the HIV/AIDS crisis is just one study that identifies socially positive impacts of recreational drug use. Erica Southgate and Max Hopwood's 2004 study into 'folk pharmacology' (*International Journal of Drug Policy* 12.4) analyses the networks of care and information-sharing that arise in the context of communities where recreational drug use is common. Race argues that in order to understand these 'mundane but consequential practices of safety, care and differentiation' we need to demolish the perspective that posits pleasure as antithetical to safety (*Pleasure* xiii). Reconfiguring the positionality of drug use and pleasure to questions of health and well-being opens up the possibility of beginning to properly understand what motivates people to engage in clubbing activities. As Race demonstrates in his study of the productive capacity of dance party culture during Australia's HIV crisis, the 'true picture' can only be developed if we 'take seriously the importance of pleasure, imagination and fantasy in the production of new materialities' (22).

The primary purpose of McGregor's novel, and publications such as *Wicked Women* and *Hell Bent*, is to feed into the community a sense of itself and of its unique aesthetic and ethical qualities. This has the follow-on effect of creating a sense of self and of belonging in individuals. As well as being 'blinded' by the drug use in *chemical palace* and by preconceived expectations of what a 'rave narrative' should look like, critics of McGregor's novel usually also express a very subtle distaste for the amount of sex in the novel (Ley 2002; Durber 2006; Elliott n.d; Egan 2004). Phrases like 'mindless sex' (Durber), 'anonymous sex' and 'varied sexual couplings' (Egan) are used liberally, negating McGregor's complex representations of love, friendship and sexuality in the novel by employing a flippant tone that conveys paternalistic disapproval. These quips make the scene seem as if it is indeed merely a space of self-indulgent hedonism and consumption: a 'meaningless' orgy of pleasure, drugs and bodies. (This criticism is rarely expressed overtly by reviewers, but is evident in the belittling or sarcastic tone.) The fact that there is a lot of sex in the book is in fact intentional and pivotal to the novel's messages, one of which is the active promotion of a radical sex-

positive culture. The Chemical Palace is a scene where 'promiscuity', sexual diversity and sexual freedom are pursued, practised and fiercely defended. While not all the relationships in the novel are non-monogamous or poly-amorous, these alternative kinds of relationships are relatively common, are supported by many participants in the scene, and are tolerated by all. More importantly, radical queer culture rejects any conflation of sexual promiscuity (for want of a term with less negative connotations) with ethical inferiority. The right to do whatever one pleases with one's own body that this scene promotes extends from performance, to practices of piercing, cutting and BDSM, etc, to drug use and sexual experimentation. McGregor's presentation of radical sexual practice in the novel is deeply positive and vital, not characterised by mindlessness and ennui, as some reviewers (especially Durber) suggest.

Crimp criticises the unproductive moralism that paints queer promiscuity as the reason for HIV infection, and HIV infection as 'proof' of the need for conservative politics (4-5). He characterises the logic of conservative gay responses to HIV infection in the following way:

Prior to AIDS gay men were frivolous pleasure-seekers who shirked the responsibility that comes with normal adulthood – settling down with a mate, raising children, being an upstanding member of society. Gay men only wanted to fuck (and take drugs and stay out all night and dance), and at that to fuck the way naughty teenage boys want to fuck – with anyone attractive to them, anytime, anywhere no strings attached. Then came AIDS. AIDS made gay men grow up. They had to find meaning in life beyond the pleasure of the moment. They had to face the fact that fucking has consequences. They had to deal with real life, which means growing old and dying. So they became responsible. And then everyone else accepted gay men. It turns out that the only reason gay men were shunned was that they were frivolous pleasure-seekers who shirked responsibility. Thank God for AIDS. AIDS saved gay men. (4-5)

While this is somewhat of a caricature of conservative gay political opinion, which takes diverse forms, it expresses the logic extremely well. It is not uncommon to encounter gay men, lesbians and other queers who express negative views of radical or unconventional queer sexual lifestyles and argue that the promiscuity of gay men is reason and justification for the homophobia directed towards them. As well as the offensive suggestion that somehow the tragedy of AIDS has been 'good for' the gay community, many conservative gay commentators promote a homogenising integration of queer people into a capitalist, nuclear-family model of living. This political view favours gays and lesbians who are 'good consumers' and obedient workers within the system, and further disenfranchises young, radical and poor queer people. The self-abasing, anti-pleasure attitude of conservative gay politics is destructive to the important project of understanding the various modes of engaging with adulthood and citizenship that *chemical palace* explores through the experiences of its characters.

Conservative sexual politics tend to operate through exclusion and prohibition, and as such are diametrically opposed to the practices and ethos of radical queer cultures, which value freedom and diversity in the extreme. The tendency of sexually-conservative gays to construct their views and practices as mature, and the views and practices of radical, sex-positive queers as immature, is dangerous and unproductive. It reduces a complex set of practices, economies and relationships (which are social, ethical and even spiritual) to the image of a selfish gluttonous child pursuing mindless pleasure at any cost. The gay nightclub invariably becomes (problematically) associated first and foremost with casual sex, which is constructed as mindless and meaningless, and nightclub practices are constructed as damaging to the image and social-standing of queer people in society. It is impossible to separate the

three-pronged concept that dancing-links-to-drug-taking-links-to-casual sex, and this is construed negatively by conservative gay social commentators and the mainstream 'straight' media, and positively by radical queers. Studies such as this project, Jonathan Bollen's *Queer Kinesthesia* (1999), Sarah Thornton's *Club Cultures* (1996), Race's *Pleasure Consuming Medicine* (2009), and many more, have demonstrated that there are multiple significant motivations for clubbing, drug-taking and engaging in sex. These studies also show that there are numerous positive outcomes from these activities; on both individual and collective levels. Understanding and evaluating these is impossible when conservative-gay, or conservative-hetero judgements as to the value and morality of the pursuit of pleasure are employed.

In her 2005 work, *In a Queer Time and Place* (New York: New York UP), Judith Halberstam introduces the concept of 'queer time'. Halberstam identifies illuminating alternative constructions of time and life-narratives, as experienced by queer subjects in contemporary Western societies, arguing that, in living according to radically different time-lines than that of the heterosexual majority, queer subjects live a kind of extended adolescence. Detaching queerness from sexual orientation and sexual preference, Halberstam focuses on the 'logics of location, movement, and identification... strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices' of queer groups of people ('Queer' 1). While Halberstam includes drug addicts, musicians and even the unemployed in her scope of analysis, I intend to apply her concepts here to the kind of *bent* communities that feature in *chemical palace*, and the lesbian music scenes that Halberstam discusses in the book's seventh chapter, 'What's That Smell?' (154-6). Queer communities, such as those discussed by Halberstam, construct their sense of themselves and time not in opposition to the mainstream of society but outside it, as if it is barely relevant to them. The common life-narrative of: education -> romance -> career success -> status and wealth -> marriage and respectability -> reproduction -> and retirement, seems alien and irrelevant to individuals whose self-image has been constructed from a base of social exclusion, violent rejection or invisibility. Achieving 'respectability' is often not an option for queers unless they are willing to negate their sexuality, and narratives of reproduction and parenting more often than not exclude queers. In this context, queer individuals and subcultural groups have developed alternative life-narratives and concepts of time (Halberstam 'Queer' 2). The lifestyles and spaces that result from these new temporal economies include dance parties and nightclubs. Appreciating how the economies of capitalist wealth-accumulation, and heterosexist reproductive-ambition, exclude young queer people allows us to understand the critical importance for these groups in creating their own spaces and alternative life-narratives. In an insightful article discussing women's sex-on-premises venues, Corie Hammers (2008) posits 'access to, and the claiming of, the public sphere' as fundamental to fostering a sense of self-esteem and legitimation for queer people (153). She continues:

Being both marginalized by hetero-male spaces, while lacking venues of their own, spaces for gender deviants (Butler 1990, Valentine 1993, 1995, Wolfe 1997, Halberstam 1998) to feel at ease in their own skin are few and far between. (153)

The active creation of these spaces – from sex venues, to dance parties, to group households – is not simply empowering, it is *self-constructing*. Participation in queer spaces, including dance spaces, is for many queer individuals an antidote to a deep sense of exclusion. Hammers credits the queer women's sex-on-premises venues in her study with providing 'a space in which to display their gendered and sexed selves unabashedly and without apology – something [she] argue[s] is queer *and* radical' (155, original emphasis).

As Halberstam reveals, a striking characteristic of queer time is that it tends to be more focussed on the present than the future (2). When they lack historical and cultural images by which to imagine their own future, queer subjects tend not to prioritise it. The comprehensible logic in this approach is apparent when the inevitability of reproduction is removed from a person's life-equation. A sense of urgency and 'compressed time' is additionally understandable in the context of the devastation of HIV/AIDS on queer communities, psychologies and the imaginations. In other words, it is difficult for some queer people in certain contexts to imagine that there will even *be* a future for them (Halberstam 2). Radical queer subcultural movements, such as that in *chemical palace*, offer new economies of *meaning* to those for whom the 'normal' (capitalist, heterosexist, middle-class) ambitions to marriage and reproduction are inaccessible or hold no relevance. Halberstam says:

Queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience – namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death. ('Queer' 2)

So, in the absence of a standard hetero-normative life-plan and future-focus, 'the [present] moment' becomes intensely meaningful, and the 'transient, the fleeting, the contingent' become all-important (2). Resisting fatalistic and negative caricatures of this phenomenon, Halberstam argues that it leads not to 'compression and annihilation', but to countless imaginative and productive constructions of *life-time* and *life-style* (2). As well as queers, other groups of people live permanently or temporarily 'outside of reproductive and familial time as well as on the edges of labor and production' (10). These 'ravers, club kids, HIV-positive barebackers, rent boys, sex workers, homeless people, drug dealers, and the unemployed' all express a queer temporality because they live according to different time-schedules than the mainstream, conducting their activities when most people are asleep, and, whether by choice or necessity, they also live in the spaces abandoned by the mainstream (10). For participants in radical queer dance party cultures, these abandoned spaces are like a playground in which to build the kind of world in which they desire to live. Halberstam's notion of queer temporalities is valuable because it illuminates the usually-hidden assumptions by which we judge 'normal' adult behaviour. This awareness makes it more difficult for critics and academics to dismiss dance party culture as just an immature 'phase' that society went through in the 1990s. This study examines a number of alternative economies of meaning that are predicated upon the transient, the fleeting and the contingent. Halberstam's notion of the significance of queer temporalities assists in mapping the economies of joy, transcendence, community and non-consumerist hedonism that thrive in these radical queer dance party spaces.

The aesthetics, the parties, the people

McGregor explained that Lanny K made the mix tape, 'chemical palace', for her after the first dance party that she 'produced with Julie Callaghan, Waded (then called Bernice Neyland) and Melinda Dimitriades' (Int. 1.). The parties McGregor helped to organise were irreverent theatrical affairs that featured cutting-edge music, challenging performances and rich aesthetics. The following describes the author's heavy involvement in putting on events in the 1990s:

That party was called 'Fanny Palace' and took place at Byblos on Oxford st in November 1995. We did a few more Fanny Palaces over the years, although Melinda dropped out of the team, followed by Julie – so the last Fanny Palace was a series of weekly clubs run by Waded and I at Icebox on Kelllet St in early 1998... We meant

‘Fanny’ in the american sense (shoot me) – ie, tush. Posterior. In the unisex sense.

They were very theatrical parties, very dirty as well, and very mixed. (Int. 1.)

Irreverence and ‘cheek’ were common qualities of the aesthetics at parties in the 1990s.

Wicked Women and *Hell Bent* offer the best published examples of the ethos and aesthetics of the scene in the 1990s. *Wicked Women*, described on some covers as ‘A Magazine of Lesbian Sex and Sexuality’ (1.27, 1995), and on others as ‘Porn for/by Queers’ (2.6, 1992), epitomises the scene of the 1990s, with many colourful descriptions of events and activities comparable to those in *chemical palace*. In its editorial, *Wicked Women* 2.6 (1992) promotes ‘‘Powersurge’, the 1st International Lesbian S/M Conference’ (an event in Seattle), alongside a new local (Sydney) club for femmes and femme-enthusiasts called the ‘Fu Fu Room’ which ‘welcomes sluts of all persuasions to attend, particularly transsexuals and butches who appreciate the subtleties of femme distraction’ (5). The editors titillate by juxtaposing language that is profane (‘sluts of all persuasions’) with formal expressions (‘the subtleties of femme distraction’), fashioning a radical queer style and idiom. This editorial also covers the opening of a new club in Melbourne, ‘The Hellfire Club’, which went onto become an institution in Sydney and Melbourne, continuing at the time of completing this study (2010). *Wicked Women*’s editors tell readers that the ‘club boasts mistresses and masters on hand, private backrooms for S/M play, bondage, tattooing, piercing and performances’ (14). These practices of cutting and bondage, popular with participants in the BDSM scene, are imbued with deeper meaning in McGregor’s novel. While both formats capture the ‘spirit’ of the scene, the novel format McGregor exploits allows for a deeper engagement with character, motivation and symbolism than is possible in the magazine format. The second party organised by the friendship network in *chemical palace*, Scum, is advertised as ‘[h]ardcore camp for freaks and fetishists of all persuasions’ (78), demonstrating the same irreverence and vitality inherent in the language of the historic examples.

In the 1990s *Wicked Women* provided an avenue for the expression of radical queer ideas and the promotion of radical queer culture and events, but it was also associated with a series of coinciding parties, which provided a forum for discussion, a show-case of radical queer talent and aesthetics, and a space for the radical queer ethos to be developed. Trash Vaudeville describes his involvement as a performer in these and similar events:

The first show involved six of us, including Glita Supanova (of Gurlisque) the now professional circus artist Azaria Universe, and of course myself. We threw ourselves into the scene, performing in several consecutive years of the Ms Wicked competition, I of course was always a supporting cast member as this was a women’s erotic sexually expressive performance event. In the final year there was a Mr Wicked competition, which I entered and won. It was great timing that my close friend Sex Intentions also won Ms Wicked at the same year. I dug up the edition of *Wicked Women* magazine featuring us both the other day and it was fun reading our declarations as Ms and Mr Wicked. (Int. 1.)

Competitions such as these provided a vehicle for the radical queer community to develop its own ‘heroes’ and discuss what is considered ‘sexy’. The idea that ‘the world is a stage’ is not unique, but what differentiates radical queer culture is its tireless insistence that anyone and everyone can be a star. These radical queer magazines not only promoted queer culture and provided a rallying point, but they also articulated and recorded the unconventional artifice and imagery of the era. Leafing through old editions of *Wicked Women*, we are able to trace the constantly developing, distinctly heterogenous, non-conformist aesthetics of the radical queer scene in the 1990s. Trash Vaudeville points to the ‘combination of camp and darker

tones' that characterises his performance work, and that of his contemporaries in the 1990s (Int. 1.)¹². McGregor describes the costumes and aesthetics of the scene as 'rich, wild and wacky' (Int. 2.). These distinctive qualities are also captured in *Dis-ease 3* (1994), which incorporates an article on 'Dyke Glamour' by a writer calling herself 'Femme Slut From Hell' (8). The writer introduces 'dyke glam' – a style which is not based on impressing men, like traditional glamour. Dyke glam incorporates 'overtone of satire, role-playing, and sheer fun, with our masks & costumes, be they vampire, crustie/punk, drag king, the 'dead' look, glitter, little girl – whatever' (8). The manifold subcultural aesthetic trends functioning in the singular 'dyke glam' style belong to more general and mainstream subcultural trends, particularly punk and 'heroin chic' which have been commodified and coopted into mainstream fashions. However, it is the diversity and the creative 'mining' of a concurrent multitude of styles, each with varying symbolic functions, that captures the creativity of the radical queer scene. None of these looks alone characterise The Chemical Palace, or hold a privileged place on the dance floor: what characterises the radical queer dance party scene is the multiplicity of aesthetic trends and expressions and the sheer heterogony of aesthetics on the scene. Furthermore, participants often refuse to buy their looks: outfits are usually created, found, or put together from collected items, rather than being purchased as a prefabricated item. These outfits are most often not repeated, and where characters *are* recreated, they usually develop, rather than being static. Fundamentally, on the radical queer scene many looks coexist. This subverts fashion's tendency to encourage contemporaries to dress homogenously, according to specific trends, and perverts the linear movement of fashion.

In a poignant scene in *chemical palace*, Billy, who is always made up in a radical, 'alternative' way whenever she goes out, is hassled by a group of young men on the street, who leer after her, yelling 'Scum, ya fucken scum' (64). The response of traffic, who comes to Billy's aid, intimates that this is a regrettably common experience for the girls: 'Makes you feel alive, hey?' Billy responds: 'Keeps up my immunity.' McGregor is reminding her readers that in the 1980s and 1990s, it was *not* generally accepted for people to dress in radical and non-conformist ways; even in the centre of Sydney. This kind of harassment and abuse is part of life for many. Trash Vaudeville talks about similar experiences in the 1990s, including being refused entry to venues because of the way he and his friends were dressed (Int. 1.). For radical queers, even the seemingly personal act of dressing up to explore and challenge one's own identity or gender becomes public, and can be seen as a radical act. Nonconformist physical presentation is often seen as a challenge to the status quo, even being perceived as threatening by conservative onlookers. Often, the 'dressed up' individual has no intention whatsoever of provoking a response and does not seek the attention they receive. They understand their experimentation as a *personal* journey, a way expressing themselves, and perhaps also as a social marker; a way of being identified by like-minded people. In 2010 it is more acceptable and common for people to sport radical and subcultural looks, but there is still not a total acceptance of alternative dress in the public sphere, and violent consequences can still result for those brave the practice. Many aspects of radical queer culture are incorrectly-construed as a violent challenge to mainstream society, when in fact radical queer scenes generally have one principal demand – to be allowed to thrive unhindered. What seems natural to participants in radical queer scenes appears as an abomination to unseasoned outsiders. Of course, some radical queers believe in challenging the status quo and wish to mount violent protest against mainstream society, but this kind of politicisation cannot be

¹² This feature continues to characterise contemporary manifestations of radical queer culture, as discussed in Chapters 5 and 7.

surmised by observing the fashion of an individual. However, whether deliberate or not, simply through living, looking and loving the way they want to, members of The Chemical Palace are involved in a kind of social and political movement.

McGregor presents this paradox in the novel where Holmes is looking at a picture of his great-grandfather, who was 'one of the first men to surf' in Australia (95). This was a radical action at a time when surfing was outlawed because men were forbidden to swim in public before sunset. Holmes wistfully wonders if his grandfather was a 'conscious outlaw or just a man whose passion happened to be illicit' (95). McGregor is communicating the widely-held perspective that the radical tastes and preferences of these people are not political but personal. This is an important message in McGregor's philosophy. While I question the naturalisation of desire, I also understand that for a majority of queer people their queer desires are not a 'conscious choice'. The feeling that one does not 'belong' in mainstream society, and the desire to express an alternative persona through dress, manner and style, is deeply-felt. While McGregor may agree with the idea that desire is socially-constructed, she promotes an alternative to the view that every radical person is 'just trying to get attention'. The nature and structure of The Chemical Palace itself is predicated upon a profound desire for 'something else' – a burning need to create and re-create culture. Analyses of youth participation in subcultural scenes do not sufficiently capture this urge, nor do they explain its often life-long expression, as Davidson has suggested ('Minor' 140). McGregor argues that the motivation for her characters' engagement in radical queer dance party culture is *not* a desire to create a hostile counterculture. Rather, McGregor presents her characters as people whose passions just happen to be illicit (or 'immoral', 'extreme', 'unusual', etc). Brought together by similar desires and galvanised by social exclusion, these people whose passions are illicit end up forming a 'scene'. Radical queer scenes differ greatly in structure and orientation from most 'communities', so an interrogation of the notion of 'the scene' is desirable.

The mainstream gay community dance parties discussed by Race (*Pleasure* 20-30) manifest a similar sense of community that *chemical palace's* parties inspire:

The sense of community that was animated at dance parties was real with real effects. It was realised in the affirmative apprehension of thousands of bodies presumed affected in similar ways by the accidents of history and the exclusions of heterosexual society. It was worked out in the minutiae of caring practices, the forging of dependable relations outside the family form, the inventive expression of memory and grief, the commitment to a safe sex ethic. It was tapped into by agencies seeking to advance the public rights of gay men, lesbians, and people with HIV/AIDS, to deliver health programming, and to conduct research. It helped sustain a collective sense of predicament, power, care, and commitment – a shared ethos enabling wide-ranging co-operation and transformative activity. (22)

Academics frequently debate the concept of 'community', and question its use in gay and lesbian contexts, but the productive real-world effects created by the 'hallucinated' sense of community are undeniable (Race 22). In the 1990s, gay dance events sought to raise funds for grass-roots welfare and advocacy. These parties sought to harness the power of the dance party experience to achieve political and social goals. Sydney's Mardi Gras (parade and party) has always been promoted as a 'community event' and has been used – quite successfully – to convey the sense of a thriving gay community. However, as well an event Mardi Gras is also an organisation, and in the 1990s Mardi Gras did not allow bisexuals or heterosexuals to become members. This policy of exclusion meant that for some people Mardi Gras came to

represent a narrow construction of the queer community. Race reminds us that cultural events, such as the Mardi Gras Parade, Mardi Gras Party and Sleaze Ball, are not just expressions of the community, but active components in its construction:

...we need to consider community not as a pre-existing entity out of which politics and culture somehow naturally spring but, rather, as made and apprehended actively, through the representational and embodied forms within which it constitutes and recognizes itself. (20-1)

What kind of community is Mardi Gras constructing if it excludes queers based on their desires? This question is implicit in *chemical palace* where 'straight gays' are despised as much as 'straight straights' (44).

In the context of *The Chemical Palace*, the term 'community' is not strictly appropriate; I prefer to use the term 'scene': ie; radical queer *scene*. Of course, the term 'radical queer community' is indispensable on occasion (predominantly to satisfy grammatical requirements or to differentiate from party events) but I prefer to use it sparingly. 'The Scene' is the name given to the primary or mainstream gay scene, and I use capital letters when referring to it. The Scene is a community of sorts but one that is *event*-based. You cannot be 'born into' the gay scene; it has a casual and transient membership and its participants are mostly members of other communities who also dabble on the scene. The 'radical queer scene' is a splinter group of the gay and lesbian scenes, but is also fed into by other non-gay communities. It is manifested largely in parties, performance, art events, and publications and brings together many communities and movements. The radical queer scene functions like a network and this is a useful way to understand it. *The Chemical Palace* is not simply an ephemeral subculture – it is like a movement, connecting members of other communities and subcultures who desire cultural experiences that are unavailable elsewhere.

Some critics express strong opposition to the idea that party events, nightclubs and leisure spaces can be seen to constitute an expression of cultural production and community. There is a substantial amount of queer criticism – both academic and popular – that derides 'The Scene'. Davidson defines The Scene as a cultural construction that revolves around a commercialised gay ghetto where participants can meet, look at others and *be seen* (2). Here they spend their energy and money at bars, clubs, sex venues, restaurants and cafes, even fetish and lifestyle stores. Davidson problematises Altman's claim that The Scene represents not 'the opposite of revolutionary desire but ... its apoliticised, sublimated expression (2).' Furthermore, Davidson sheds light on the flimsy logic alleging that bars and discos represent a kind of 'going back into the closet' for queer people, who should supposedly be 'out' expressing themselves through serious political activity 'on the streets' (2). Rejection of gay scenes and ghettos is often accompanied by a rhetoric of de-authenticity; a claim that bars and clubs represent a phoney substitute for community designed to dull queers into a passive stupor (3). Like Davidson, I am circumspect about simplistic claims that party culture and/or the physical and conceptual spaces of the scene constitute a dangerous 'trap' into which previously progressive and 'authentic' queer people may fall, rendering them powerless pawns of the 'pink dollar'. Spaces within The Scene and the connected alternative scenes such as *The Chemical Palace*, while performing a social function, also foster political activity and promote progressive debate, and the work of organising parties and events creates new anti-capitalist economies alongside the mainstream. While I *do* intend to propose a distinction between mainstream and alternative queer scenes, I am also conscious of not opposing them too sharply, as the cross-over between the two is intricate. Radical queer scenes are generally linked to the gay ghetto and generally located within its geographical vicinity. Some DJs and

promoters host events in both scenes, some participants move between the two scenes, often in the same night, and venues occasionally alter their clientele, catering to both. There are features of each scene inherent in the other. Davidson reminds us that we must wrestle with the seemingly uncomfortable paradox that sites of community are also often sites of commodified expressions of community ('Golden' 3). This is true for both *The Scene* and *The Chemical Palace*. Both scenes foster culture outside of the bars and clubs, such as queer art, neighbourhoods in residential areas, and political and social organisations, but both scenes are centred around venues, bars and clubs. While queer scenes may be regrettably commodified, it is counterproductive to paint them as a *false* expression of community. It is possible to maintain a strong critique of the 'pink dollar' while still recognising the positive and productive effects the scene offers. Radical queers maintain this critique and inject anti-consumerist philosophy and practice into their events, while maintaining the practices of dance party that have proved so productive for queer community-building.

McGregor's novel, *Wicked Women*, and *Hell Bent* represent efforts by members of the radical scene to define its aims and ethos – to create a kind of manifesto. McGregor reportedly 'feels fine' about the idea of the novel being viewed as a manifesto for the scene of the 1990s, but she is also quick to point out that the work does not speak for anyone else's experience (Int. 2.). Although the novel performs the role of recording the philosophy of the scene and capturing some of its unique aesthetic qualities, it would be naïve to claim that this subjective fictional account is an 'accurate' representation of radical queer dance party culture in the 1990s. The novel (re)constructs the scene as a space of diversity, change and renewal, a cultural space in which participants prioritise 'the embrace of the new and unexpected, the joy of risk-taking' as well as a 'commitment to continually turning over of the stones' (McGregor Int. 2.). The projects undertaken by McGregor's characters are designed to engender moments of cultural galvanisation, promote manifestations of artistic potential, and create a culture of affirmation. In her rendering of these projects, it can be argued that the author has indeed captured the essence of radical queer club culture.

2. The Carnival: Transcendence and work/play on the scene

I have a belief in the universal language of music and its power to unite communities and change the world!! This is why we feel it necessary to take it back to the underground. Non profit solar powered underground community organized multimedia electronic experiments. FREE venues of the most acoustically bizarre form. Where the finger of the law and other party pooper oppressors can never catch us ... in drains, in tunnels, sewers and sidewalks, keep your ears to the ground for sounds from the underground ... get involved! (Zogdysfunct & Lab Rats, qtd. in St John 78)

Having introduced the qualities of *The Chemical Palace*, I now offer an investigative discussion on the mechanisms of the dance floor. I am especially interested in dance party practices that characterise radical dance scenes, like as doofs and illicit urban raves. My frame of reference moves inwards to the dance floor itself in order to connect the phenomenon of the radical dance party to historical manifestations of party culture. By plugging the scene into previously-analysed party phenomenon, we can understand its broad appeal and the passionate following it inspires. Ultimately, radical dance party practice can be productively analysed as an expression of carnivalesque party culture. McGregor's characters perceive themselves as artists whose art is in the creation of radical, non-consumerist and progressive social spaces. These carnival-like spaces, predicated upon the shameless pursuit of joy and self-expression, engender similar experiences and interpersonal interactions to those that Bakhtin describes in *Rabelais and His World*. While McGregor thoroughly details the bacchanalian parties that her characters arrange, she spends an even more significant volume of the text to describing the build-up to these events. For McGregor's characters, these events are the culmination of weeks of hard work, preparation and creative output. In her painstakingly detailed representation of party planning in the novel, McGregor depicts a form of partying that is anything but mindless hedonistic self-obliteration. Unlike most of the 'rave films' of the 1990s and early 2000s¹³, *chemical palace* demonstrates that dance party can be a deliberate, disciplined and ritualistic expression of joy and self-exploration, and a way of creating and maintaining a group identity. However, as with the feasts and carnivals in the texts of Rabelais, the dance parties in *chemical palace* are also spaces in which participants extricate themselves from their usual daily realities. In *The Chemical Palace*, diversity is revered, disease and death are explored through play, taboos are discarded and new gender presentations and sexual cultures are created. This is the power of a carnivalesque party space, which appears in various forms in different epochs, always featuring the same core elements. Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque is critical to any discussion of dance party culture. Using Bakhtin's work as a theoretical frame we can extract the bacchanalian heart of *The Chemical Palace*, illuminating the radical, joyful and profound practices that fashion these spaces as carnivalesque. Examining *The Chemical Palace* as a manifestation of carnival requires two avenues of enquiry; the first is an analysis of nightclub and dance party spaces as 'carnivalesque spaces' in the Bakhtinian sense, and the second is an exploration of the concepts and processes of 'work' and 'play' in the party context.

¹³ Such as *Go: Life Begins at 3am* and *One Perfect Night*, etc.

Dance party as carnival

In *chemical palace*, McGregor presents a culture of freedom and chaos, antithetical to the historical construction of a palace as a place of order and discipline, cleanliness and wealth, but in fitting with later popular uses of 'palace' in the names of theatres, brothels and other places of entertainment and indulgence. For participants, The Chemical Palace is a community manifested in events that provide entertainment; a sense of release; cultural, political and sexual education; escape and inspiration. The events are a showcase for artists and performers and a meeting place and site for networking. They provide a space in which experiences are shared, creating a sense of community. At their best, carnivalesque events can even provide a profound feeling of transcendence and joy. In his exploration of the writings of Rabelais, Bakhtin reveals the potential for joy and transcendence in carnivalesque spaces. His particular interest lies in Rabelais' representation of folk culture, feasts and festival spaces – and the laughter of the people in these spaces. The parallels between the role and nature of carnival in the Middle Ages and those of the dance party scene described in *chemical palace* are striking and remarkable.

Bakhtin's descriptions of the humour, philosophy and ideologies of Medieval carnival culture make for useful comparison with the events and performances, and linguistic and cultural phenomena, that epitomise the radical queer dance party culture in *chemical palace*. As well as being outside of the work-a-day world, both cultural spaces are predicated on joy and corporeal expression, and both have a strong focus on music and theatricality. The following statement about Rabelais' texts can be applied with salient relevance to *chemical palace*, despite the chronological and generic differences:

Rabelais' images have a certain undestroyable nonofficial nature. No dogma, no authoritarianism, no narrow-minded seriousness can coexist with Rabelaisian images; these images are opposed to all that is finished and polished, to all pomposity, to every ready-made solution in the sphere of thought and world outlook. (Bakhtin 3)

This statement is applicable not only to McGregor's writing style, which also has a characteristically 'unfinished' feel, but to the general philosophy of the scene the novel records. The costumes and performances, decorations and stage settings at radical queer dance parties usually present incomplete, unfinished, basic and raw symbolisms. Even ambitious projects incorporate recycled and found objects, often displaying a 'homemade' feel, and are produced on a minimal budget. Participants on the radical queer scene are proud of this and so the popular aesthetic is one where imperfections (hems, stitching, asymmetry, etc) tend to be displayed rather than hidden. Club Kooky in the late 1990s, for example, offered an outlet for adventurous forays into costuming, with one regular dancer becoming infamous for repeatedly wearing nothing but a garbage bag with shoes and socks! However, the 'undestroyable nonofficial nature' of radical queer culture is more than just its literal expression.

Owing to the outsider status of the scene it seeks to document, *chemical palace* presents a plot that demonstrates an opposition to literary polish and narrative completeness. The plotlines of the novel are decisively non-linear with various plotlines and characters tapering-off to nothing. Furthermore, sections of the novel are decidedly banal. While *chemical palace* seeks to record the transformative and empowering potential of the dance party space, it also exposes the negative and destructive facets associated with party culture, such as drug abuse, social marginalisation and poverty. McGregor's novel strikes a fine balance between painting a lasting portrait of radical dance culture at its best, and building a narrative around the characters' differing realities and attitudes towards the scene: Billy is

beginning to grow tired of the scene just as traffic is ‘falling for it’ (31). The novel is ‘opposed to all that is finished and polished’ because the text mirrors the scene itself – its ethos and politics – and the dance party experience. In fact, *chemical palace* celebrates the fact that the scene exists outside of all that is polished and outside of the restrictive requirements of consumer leisure culture.

As well as a break from officialdom, carnivalesque party spaces offer a ‘second life’ for participants. Of the Medieval carnival, Bakhtin says:

These spaces were the second life of the people, who for a time entered the utopian realm of community, equality, freedom and abundance. (9)

On the radical queer scene, dance party events offer the ultimate manifestation of this ‘second life’ within a broader society that alienates and rejects. However, for most of McGregor’s characters, this second life it is actually their primary life. The mainstream world that each must participate in to some extent is the one they see as secondary. Their ‘day jobs’ and interactions with conservative society, bureaucracy and capitalism, are constructed as a necessary evil, with most characters’ dreams and ambitions lying in the radical cultural arena. McGregor constructs this ‘utopian realm’ as a site of work and play for her characters; a place where education, toil and skill-development thrive. At the opening of *chemical palace*, the narrator tells us that:

Panic got started by a bunch of people sitting around whingeing about the lack of places to go. They couldn’t find music they liked in clubs or on the strip let alone performers so they decided to put on a party of their own. (2)

Readers are introduced immediately to the novel’s core message: that culture is not something to be passively consumed. McGregor’s insistence that cultural production is something that *everyone* should participate in goes to the heart of what radical queer scenes stand for. For many participants, the space carved out by these events is the only space in which they feel comfortable (due to their sexuality, appearance or politics) and the only space in which they feel free and alive. The sense of belonging and fraternity that is manufactured in scenes that encourage active participation is profoundly empowering. Bakhtin reveals that inclusivity and interactivity were also principal features of Medieval Carnival culture, and discusses why a culture of inclusivity can manifest the kind of transcendental experiences associated with carnivalesque spaces:

Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world’s revival and renewal, in which all take part. (7)

The radical queer party is a pantomime in which everybody plays a part. Its festival spirit is as much about community as it is about indulgence, and in this spirit normal separations between people are temporarily dissolved. As Bakhtin explicates, during carnival all are embraced on the basis of a shared humanity and the shared aims of seeking pleasure and fulfilment. The result for participants is a feeling of empowerment. This effect is the nexus of the pivotal role played by the feast in Medieval societies.

The idea of the dance party as a carnivalesque space is not new. *FreeNRG: Notes from the edge of the dance floor* (Altona: Common Ground, 2001) is a collection of writings on doofs edited by Graham St John. St John describes doof culture in Australia as a modern manifestation of the carnivalesque (6). Doofs are ‘non-profit community events, often held outdoors in remote regions where all-night dancing to a range of electronic musics transpire’

(St John 15). St John argues that doof grew out of a rejection of the growing commercialisation and perceived apolitical nature of 'raves' in the 1990s (13/14). He summarises the debate around authenticity and meaning that occurred at the time:

From an early period of the techno-rave movement in Australia elements possessing anarchic, autonomist and anti-corporate orientations have made deliberate efforts to not only withdraw from the spectacles of rock and punk, but to create something more substantial than the counterfeit culture of rave. Consolidating in inner city warehouses and outposts of opposition, like Reynolds, they have asked: 'is it possible to base a culture around sensations rather than truths, fascination rather than meaning, jouissance rather than plaisir?' (14¹⁴)

Whilst the desire to participate in a 'culture of sensations' is common to all dance party or nightclub settings, it is the communal ethos (as distinct from individualism) and the politicised participation (the antithesis of escapism) that sets doofs and radical queer dance parties apart from the commercial dance party. The radical queer and doof scenes are like cousins. They arise from the same ultimate desire and share core aims but they diverge in one critical respect: The Chemical Palace is characterised by a cultural and political focus on sexuality, corporeality and issues of urban space, while doof culture and rhetoric is more concerned with environmental issues, Australian Indigenous issues and the natural environments of the bush, beaches and rural areas. The main difference here is not locality, but concern. While both scenes are predicated first and foremost on dance and music, where doof culture may be said to represent a 'carnival of protest', The Chemical Palace represents a 'carnival of expression'. Doofs lack the emphasis on the body and sexuality with which radical queer party spaces are saturated. Doof culture aligns more with the 1960s 'hippy' movement, while radical queers strive to create spaces in which new ways of living and of presenting as a human being and sexual subject are enacted on the dance floor, the stages and even in the back rooms. Despite this difference in orientation between the two scenes, what is happening on their dance floors is similar.

St John believes it is the all-inclusive 'do it yourself/ourself' (DIY/DIO) culture of doofs that delivers a profound sense of empowerment to participants, providing a more significant experience than passive commercial parties (15). He observes that offering the possibility of inclusion in the activities to all participants, creates more meaningful leisure activities. The DIY/DIO principle is decisive in The Chemical Palace and all manifestations of radical culture. At every radical event described in *chemical palace*, participants are encouraged to think, conceptualise, plan, create and share in the fruits of their efforts; from elaborate costumes and dance floor performances, to the decorations and the 'official' performances of the night. In a society where adults are expected to go about their daily business, drawing little attention to themselves, this kind of encouragement lifts participants from the mundane to the exciting. A DIY/DIO culture creates a theatrical environment where 'characters' emerge (I use 'character' here not in the sense of a figure in a story, but as a descriptor for a person with a distinctive personality), and such people become 'celebrities' on the scene. The DIY philosophy is also apparent in the styles of fashion that dominate radical queer scenes, which frequently incorporate messy and unfinished features, like rips (in stockings), jagged edges, spray-paint (such as on boots), visible stitching and smeared makeup. That is not to say that these outfits are unsophisticated or lack a sense of aesthetic completeness, just that the style of them is very different to that of clean, homogenous, mass-

¹⁴ St John quotes Simon Reynolds. Reynolds, Simon. 'Rave Culture: Living Dream or Living Death?' in Steve Redhead (ed.) *The Clubcultures Reader: Readings in Popular Cultural Studies*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1997, p.109.

produced garments. It is appreciated for participants to wear something they have made, put together out of discarded scraps, or something that at least gives that impression. This is common to both doof culture and radical queer dance party culture, and is a feature of the cultures' inclusivity and accessibility.

The inclusivity of radical dance parties and doofs is also found in the way the events are envisioned, constructed and progressed. Utilising the skills, contributions and labour-power of an unspecialised, transient network of people, the organisers of these parties generally do so in an organic and decentralised way. Rather than being organised by one or two promoters who pay for a venue and pay DJs, dancers and performers of their choice (within a specific brief), these parties are organised by a collective that actively seeks input from the community in the areas of art and decoration, performances and music, promotion, and infrastructure. The ethos of these events is that anyone with something to contribute is welcome, so they serve as a launch pad for radical artists and musicians. This feature has ensured radical queer events remain relevant and meaningful to their communities. Discussing the 'greater social significance' of the doof, St John explains that 'spectator/star roles are not easily filled' and 'the artist is not a special sort of person, but every person is a special sort of artist' (15). This philosophy is fundamental to carnivalesque culture: Bakhtin defines the carnivalesque space as a space that 'embrace[s] all people' and in which everyone participates (7). Additionally, St John overtly aligns dance party culture with Bakhtin's carnivalesque, describing instances in Western cultural history – from Medieval carnival culture, to 'hippy' festivals like Woodstock, to contemporary dance parties – where participants of party culture have escaped the regimentations of the established social order by enjoying carnivalesque space (16-17). He claims that 'history reveals such Dionysia to possess a perennial quality' (17), and this too is a central message of *chemical palace*. People have always partied, they will always party, and they will do so even in the face of persecution.

While connecting the Medieval carnivalesque to modern manifestations, it is worth considering the divergences. For example, Medieval carnivals and feasts were usually state-regulated, centrally-organised events where the masses were allowed a brief respite from serious labour to engage in ritualistic partying, whereas the parties of The Chemical Palace are *self-motivated* and *self-organised* events, involving only an alternative minority. Furthermore, radical queer events are not state-sanctioned; many are actually held illegally in unlicensed venues or venues with the wrong kind of license. Despite this critical difference, the aims of renewal and transcendence through bacchanalia are common. For example, Bakhtin's construction of the economies of carnivalesque space still offer valuable insights. One such thought-provoking commonality is the contextual role of bacchanalia, for example Bakhtin describes a link between 'moments of crisis' and the role of the Feast:

The feast is always essentially related to time, either to the recurrence of an event in the natural (cosmic) cycle, or to biological or historic timeliness. Moreover, through all stages of historic development feasts were linked to moments of crisis, of breaking points in the cycle of nature or in the life of society and man. Moments of death and revival, of change and renewal always led to a festive perception of the world. (9)

McGregor's novel captures one such 'moment of death and revival' in its description of Sydney's queer scenes at the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Perhaps the relationship Bakhtin describes between bacchanalia and moments of change or crisis accounts for the fact that radical queer dance party culture peaked during what is considered to be Sydney's HIV/AIDS crisis. These years are also said to have been the

'golden years' of the mainstream gay and lesbian dance party – if not financially then certainly in a cultural sense. The commonalities between mainstream and alternative queer dance party events indicate a need for deeper inquiry: can there even be said to be a difference between the mass spectacle and indulgence of mainstream gay and lesbian events like Mardi Gras and events like those described in McGregor's novel? They both gained energy and vigour in response to the HIV/AIDS crisis and they both offered alternatives to the image of death, darkness, silence, shame and invisibility that was being offered up to queer people and those who were infected during the crisis. However, are both party environments examples of carnivalesque space? Considering the obvious cross-over, it would be foolish to maintain that the mainstream and radical queer dance party scenes are completely distinct, with one being escapist and the other progressive. Evidence and common sense uncover that each of the two scenes incorporates both elements, but, regardless of their similarities, a distinction must be drawn between the two scenes to assist us in understanding the alternative role that radical queer dance parties, with their overt philosophy of involvement and self-awareness, play in queer communities. As well as promoting inclusivity, radical queer events actually promote a non-escapist engagement with space. Escapism involves a desire to obliterate self-awareness by abandoning responsibility for a finite period of time and 'getting away' from troubles. In this context, even large parties like Mardi Gras are not completely escapist because they play a productive socio-political role, but they are significantly less inclusive than radical parties. Race claims that the sense of community inspired by the Mardi Gras parties was:

... tapped into by agencies seeking to advance the public rights of gay men, lesbians and people with HIV/AIDS, as well as to deliver health programming and to conduct research. It helped sustain a collective sense of predicament, power, care, and commitment – a shared ethos enabling wide-ranging cooperation and transformative activity. (22)

Race demonstrates that dressing-up, dancing, flirting and drug-taking were socially and culturally productive activities during the HIV/AIDS crisis, not simply a hedonistic escape from it. Responding to the crisis with 'wide-ranging cooperation' helped to solidify a sense of community, but in coming together it became obvious that there were profound differences within this coalition.

In any strategic alliance the question naturally arises: whose community is it and what should it look like? Who is included and who is left out? What are the rules of this alliance and how will it position itself in relation to dominant forces in society? These kinds of questions quickly lead to divisions in the gay and lesbian community. While Mardi Gras started as a protest march in 1978, it had already become a relatively conservative event by the 1990s. I do not intend to discuss the history of Mardi Gras here, or to debate its politics; that has been done in studies such as Kevin Markwell's 'Mardi Gras Tourism and the Construction of Sydney as an International Gay and Lesbian City' (2002) and Ian Marsha's 'The political impact of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras' (1995). To understand the motivations of McGregor's characters we need only accept that they had a strong perception that Mardi Gras – and the gay and lesbian community more broadly – was becoming increasingly conservative. This manifested in gay and lesbian spaces becoming increasingly concerned with profits, legal liabilities and safety, even desiring assimilation into mainstream society – a desire for which participants in radical queer culture harbour intense disdain. Creators of radical queer cultural spaces sought to recreate the 'freer', more radical, and more participatory party spaces associated with the 1960s and 1970s. The sheer scale of Mardi Gras, and its requirement to provide funding for community organisations, means that it operates under more restrictive conditions than radical queers have been willing to accept. The obvious move has been to

create alternative spaces, and these spaces have often been created in opposition to Mardi Gras.

Carnavalesque party spaces promote a heightening of the senses, an amplified awareness of the self and others, a sense of improved personal and social agency and the increased participation and involvement of attendees. This is not always the case with mainstream party spaces, where policing and security can dominate the environment, rules restrict what can and cannot be done in the space, and the events are often so big that attendees become anonymous in the crowd. Despite the policing and restrictions there are pockets and outbreaks of resistance in all nightclub settings, but only radical dance party culture overtly promotes a high level of active self-aware participation. Mainstream Mardi Gras parties are more tightly regulated events that offer only a limited potential for attendees to participate and engage with the space and each other. There are certainly aspects of the carnivalesque in mainstream party events, and there are outbursts of carnivalesque *behaviours* in these spaces, but they are anomalies that organisers seek to minimise and control. Spaces like the Mardi Gras party can perhaps be evaluated as *semi-carnavalesque* – they possess more social and political meaning for their participants than a party that is run purely for profit, they usually encourage costume (albeit within the relatively conservative brief of dressing to appear ‘sexy’), and they promote a sense of ownership and community for participants, but they are also missing some crucial elements that define truly carnivalesque spaces. The control and tight policing of Mardi Gras parties limits their appeal to participants seeking a radical dance experience. There are also expected and accepted behaviours in these spaces, and a requirement for the party to conform to mainstream social standards. Furthermore, the party exists *primarily* to raise funds, not first and foremost for the pursuits of pleasure and creative expression. In *Queer City: Gay and Lesbian Politics in Sydney* (Annandale: Pluto Press, 2001), Bridget Haire examines the growing popularity of events that are offered as an alternative to the Mardi Gras party:

For if the parade has become, as I contend, a medium for communicating political messages – amidst all the glitz – to the straight community, and if the party is now priced out of reach, where is that place of communities’ celebration to occur? Perhaps at the alternative parties that have mushroomed to cater for the demand of those excluded, whether for economic or other reasons, from the official party. This suggests that what begun as a counter-culture has now sprouted its own antithesis. It may be the way of Mardi Gras’ future – the younger generations partying on their own terms outside the gates of the Old Showgrounds, while the ageing gay liberationists and the no-longer-young urban professionals tear up the dance floor within. (111)

Haire strikes at the heart of what segregates queer communities when they party: while wealth and access are certainly major differentiators, the cultural divides they spawn are infinitely more powerful. The party preferences and social identifications of individuals on these scenes are driven mostly by their relative sense of ownership and participation. Ownership of the radical queer space is the participant’s first step in the process of re-enchantment that radical dance culture provides (St John xv).

Revealing the philosophical and spiritual importance of the festive moment, St John tells us that radical dance culture ‘builds the experience of pleasure (ecstasy, rapture, sexual pleasure) into its program for cultural therapy’ (xv). Pleasure is not constructed as an individual aspiration, but as a necessary constituent in a community’s plan for health and well-being. In a world characterised by greed and individualism, radical dance scenes are constructed to be truly communal spaces, in which the pursuit of pleasure and ‘rapture’ are

politicised, ethical and progressive. Bakhtin explains that a sense of ‘higher meaning’ is always associated with carnivalesque space:

The feast has always an essential, meaningful philosophical content. No rest period or breathing spell can be rendered festive per se; something must be added from the spiritual and ideological dimension. They must be sanctioned not by the world of practical conditions but by the highest aims of human existence, that is, by the world of ideals. Without this sanction there can be no festivity. (8/9)

Our modern manifestations of carnivalesque party culture are no different. To truly be carnivalesque an event must be attached to ideology and its proponents and participants must be invested in that ideology. Ideologies can be religious or secular, they can be dogmatic or flexible, political or aesthetic, but they must be expressed in and expressed through a space, for that space to be carnivalesque. For radical queer dance events, ideologies vary but usually include a discourse on the right to take up public space; the importance of pursuing pleasure; and feminist and anti-racist ideologies, to name a few. A degree of cynicism towards the idea of dance parties as radical social spaces is understandable, and some would argue that these carnivalesque events are simply hedonism justified by a pretentious mythology, however Bakhtin’s study of Rabelais, and a number of recent projects on dance party cultures (alternative *and* mainstream), have identified strong ideological dimensions in the motivations of participants and in *actual* dance floor practices. Establishing and exploring a connection between partying (with its pursuit of joy, rapture and pleasure) and spirituality is a primary function of McGregor’s novel. This fascination with spiritual and, at times religious experience continued to inspire McGregor in her performance work with AnA Wojak in SenVoodoo, as discussed in McGregor’s 2008 travel memoir, *Strange Museums* (Perth: UWA Press, 2008), where McGregor and Wojak tour Poland staging a blood-based performance with strong religious overtones, including its reference to the Stigmata. In *chemical palace*, religious and spiritual references render palpable the connection between bacchanalia and transcendence.

For McGregor’s characters, the parties and the dance floor episodes take on a quasi-religious significance. The dance party becomes like a religious festival, where pilgrims are brought together to celebrate, ‘give praise’ and feel closer to the divine. As with any ritualistic event, there is much work involved to make it happen, but this work is a ‘labour of love’ performed by the devoted. In *chemical palace*, the struggle that the characters go through to find a suitable venue for their party recalls the struggle of minority religious and cultural groups to find space within hostile dominant cultures. After months of searching for a venue, numerous set-backs, knock-backs and difficult negotiations with venue owners, the Panic promoters are finally able to host the party they have been planning. While the novel devotes significantly more time to discussing the build-up to the party, the description of the event itself represents a powerful spiritual climax in the text and a literary triumph. The following describes the final hours of the party, after most of the work has been done and the main organisers of the event are able to relax and enjoy the remainder of the night. Breaking this scene into parts allows us to observe how McGregor has built image upon image to create a sense of religious ecstasy and rapture for the reader:

The long deep late set when the crowd thinned to family, Fred brought the lights down and pumped out more smoke till the dancefloor thickened into disappearance. Mr Hyde saw the whiteness closing in as if the bottle had been polished and he was issuing forth now playing like a demon. Torch over turntables the last light remaining, finger from the dials to the rim of vinyl lifting and replacing. (61)

In this first section of the extract, McGregor stages her scene as if in a theatre. The lights are already low to heighten the senses of touch, hearing and smell, and then the drama is heightened as the room becomes darker and smokier, forcing participants at the party to all but abandon the usually-dominant sense of sight. The DJ stands at his turntables, playing under the only remaining light – a shepherd, a guide, a light in the darkness leading and controlling those who are willing to put their trust in his steady hands. The biblical references are conscious and deliberate: the dance floor is a place of worship, and the DJ is a shepherd or messiah. Without the clarity of light, the dancers are brought down to a primal level of experience, entreated to surrender themselves and their bodies to the darkness and sound, and to become like one entity. This communal surrender of ego and individuality feels intensely spiritual. It is in the context of such surrender that the breakdown of ‘hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions’, as Bakhtin suggests, may begin to occur (10). The passage goes on:

He was playing outside of himself and everything he’d known, all the sex horror and ecstasy flowed together in a sea of celebration, the charge you could get when you’re playing peaked exactly like lust. Sirens distorted, babies crying, fog horns on a harbour, a woman’s sob cut mid-inhalation, sundry trippy sci-fi space sounds.

Kookaburras slotted perfectly on the beats as they whooped in unison, then fell out of time with the last carolling laugh. (61)

The spiritual moments participants experience through the music are closer to Pagan spirituality than the high Christian religions. This is established through in-depth descriptions of the music, where human voices and sounds of nature are juxtaposed to communicate a humbling reminder that we too are animals. Characteristically and importantly, ‘horror’ and ‘ecstasy’ are experienced together in one transcendental moment, and these opposing binaries – represented in one – invoke a ‘sea of celebration’ into which both DJ and dancers are swept. The complexities of modern life and technology are present in the sirens and fog horns, all the while being cut-through with natural and local imagery, such as that of the ‘carolling’ Kookaburras. The final section of the paragraph brings the reader back ‘down to earth’, demonstrating the natural coming-down process which hails the end of all parties (and drug-related experiences):

And traffic and Holmes and even Billy on the floor below him, raising their faces in thanks and triumph. It was dawn and light pressed against the badly blocked windows, the party still full, people dancing everywhere. He put on the last track and when the lights came up traffic called to him through the cheers. The new voodoo dancemaster of Sydney has been *launched!* (61, original emphasis)

The image of the shepherd leading his flock to salvation is complete. The final sentence communicating the promise of something wonderful and mystical: tonight may be over but something new has been created.

Involvement in radical dance culture entails a conscious effort to increase the spiritual elements of a participant’s life. (I refer to spiritual in a very broad sense, meaning ‘rapture’, a ‘transcendent sensation’, or the sense of something ephemeral and metaphysical.) The ‘voodoo dancemaster’ scene above reveals the power of the DJ to enchant and seduce the party-goer, leading them on a spiritual journey, like a preacher. In *chemical palace*, this scene plays a significant role in advancing McGregor’s representation of radical dance events as spiritual experiences. *FreeNRG* is also dedicated to venerating music and the power of ‘the undisciplined body’ submitting ‘to forbidden soundscapes’ (St John 17). St John’s collection also describes doof culture in terms of ‘spectacle’ and ‘performance’, which are key features of carnivalesque spaces. Interactivity, bold aesthetics and colourful spectacle are central to the

realisation of what St John calls ‘Australian counter culture’s aim ... of re-enchantment’ (xv). The desire to be involved in radical, progressive and unalienated activity, to be *re-enchanted*, is present throughout history. Historical examples suggest an insatiable human hunger to party, but different contexts lead to different manifestations of party culture – only *some* of which incorporate a spiritual motivation. It could be argued that our modern desire to party comes from the sense of ‘spiritual poverty’ that Andrew Ross describes in *No Respect* (London: Routledge, 1989). While Ross argues that it is ‘the middle-class counter-culture, whose adherents could afford, literally, to redefine the life of consumerism and material affluence as a life of spiritual poverty’ (137), this spiritual poverty is not limited to the middle class, and neither is the desire to transcend it. Participants in *The Chemical Palace* originate from diverse class backgrounds, but all are aware of the comparative level of material security they enjoy simply by virtue of being born into a First World democracy, where welfare and healthcare, although not always equitable, are generally available. However, all of McGregor’s characters (to some extent) consciously risk their access to security and wealth by ‘choosing’ to express themselves. McGregor says:

A fundamental difference is that we weren’t poverty stricken. In chemical palace, you’ll notice how straight some people’s day jobs are – computers, medical. The anti-consumerist attitude is complicated by that. The satire is often self-reflective. traffic is a poor artist, as is Slip. But most of the others are safely waged. (Int.1.)

Nevertheless, the spiritual poverty Ross speaks of is deeply felt by all characters and dealt with in different ways, involving significant investments of time, energy and creativity into more ‘spiritually satisfying’ activity. The pursuit of spiritual growth is captured in the book’s title: McGregor tells us that ‘chemical’ in the title was also a reference to the most elemental life forms. To the primal, essential’ (Int.1.). The resonances with St John’s doof culture, and Bakhtin’s carnival, are remarkable. All of these spaces offer participants the chance to be immersed in activity and experiences that are more satisfying and meaningful than what is offered in their everyday lives.

A poetic imperative in the novel entreats us to:

*Come with us
Leave your wheat fields
Leave your back street shops
Your fishing boats
Leave your offices in the tall skyscrapers
Leave all that is routine and commonplace
And come with us to the wilds*

*Come with us to where man has never been
But where he will go
As certain as the passage of time*

Come with us to the moon

The rocket

Is waiting... (88, original formatting)

This extract appeals directly to the reader, encouraging us to abandon capitalist labour for a period of time to seek spiritual and physical joy. This was exactly the purpose of the Medieval feast according to Bakhtin. By nature carnivalesque spaces exist outside of – and often

opposed to – the capitalist labour system. Mainstream and commercial clubs also offer an ‘escape’ from the daily grind, but the events they host are inextricably bound up in the processes of capitalism, and must conform to economic rationalist constraints. There is little room for participant involvement and ownership and the sense of spiritual engagement is diminished by the thought that already rich strangers are profiting from your ‘experience’. Participants are offered a product, with a theme and an aesthetic already in place, and they choose whether or not to buy into it. Alternative nightclub spaces, on the other hand, are always at least potentially radical because they are engaged spaces, offering significantly more opportunities to select, to participate, and to communicate in the space. The radical party space is also consistently punctuated by images and discourse designed to unsettle and challenge. The participant is empowered as they are asked to make choices about how something makes them feel – they are stimulated rather than placated. Carnavalesque party spaces frequently impart a profound sense of authenticity that makes participants feel as if their everyday lives are comparatively meaningless, ‘fake’ or ‘mind-numbing’. Seen in this light, it is conceivable why authorities have historically sought to control, coopt, or forbid the existence of carnivalesque cultural spaces.

Talking about the officially-sanctioned and controlled feasts of the Medieval period, Bakhtin says:

On the other hand, the official feasts of the Middle Ages, whether ecclesiastic, feudal, or sponsored by the state, did not lead the people out of the existing world order and created no second life. On the contrary, they sanctioned the existing pattern of things and reinforced it. ... The true nature of human festivity was betrayed and distorted. But this true festive character was indestructible; it had to be tolerated and even legalized outside the official sphere and had to be turned over to the popular sphere of the marketplace. (9)

What Bakhtin describes here is the cooption of traditional carnival cultural practice and ethos by Medieval authorities for the purpose of maintaining the status quo. By allowing the lower classes to participate in regulated, state-sponsored carnival events, the upper classes maintained a stranglehold on ‘the masses’, even appearing munificent. We observe similar processes of control and/or cooption happening to other forms of carnivalesque space throughout history, where they are either shut down or coopted by authorities: from the crackdown on dancehalls in Weimar Berlin to Sydney’s introduction of various limiting laws and licensing requirements in the 1980s and 1990s. ‘Superclubs’ like Sydney’s Arq Nightclub in Darlinghurst and Home Nightclub in Darling Harbour represent the commercial side of dance party culture, coopting queer communities, drag performer communities and feeding-off the local drug trade to make massive profits. In addition to the regulation of night time venues, Sydney’s urban nightlife has generally become increasingly controlled and policed by the state, by moral and social institutions, through law and its enforcement, and by physical architectural and geographic design, making it harder for the willing to engage with spaces and participate in communal leisure. DIY/O leisure culture has suffered due to the strict alcohol and entertainment licensing laws in NSW, the extremely high cost of running events (security costs, public liability insurance, etc), and ‘crackdowns’ on the drug trade in a scene whose economy ironically thrives on it.

Christopher Murn details the changing laws and regulations governing Sydney’s and Melbourne’s social scenes in ‘Empty Spaces: Government regulation is killing Australian culture’ (2008). Murn bemoans the lack of places for emerging Australian artists to perform and exhibit, and the fact that ‘red tape’ discourages many people from even considering

organising large social events (30). Revealing that the liquor licensing costs alone have made it nearly impossible for small promoters to stage events in Sydney, Murn explains that licences generally cost in the tens of thousands, compared with around \$500 in Melbourne (31). These regulations were only beginning to take effect when McGregor was writing *chemical palace*. Murn espouses the view that:

If Governments are serious about creating culturally rich communities, rather than focussing on the controversial issue of Government arts subsidies, they must first remove the regulatory impediments that smother creativity and innovation. Innovative and new artists are being left to drown in a regulatory cocktail. (31)

Licensing fees and regulations are adopted in the name of 'safety', in order 'to protect' the public from the chaos that ensues when people get together to drink and have a good time. Party culture has always suffered moral attacks, but Race echoes the views espoused by McGregor and others that the reaction to dance party spaces *in particular* has been disproportionately strong (*Pleasure* 10-11). Discussing the drug raid and subsequent closure of the dance party Azure (2007), Race illuminates the paternalistic, intrusive and ultimately unsuccessful practices perpetrated against youth culture, saying:

What is interesting is how the status of certain substances as 'illicit' provides an occasion for the state to engage in what can be described as a disciplinary performance of moral sovereignty. This performance bears little relation to the actual dangers of drug consumption – in fact it exacerbates them, as we shall see. It is an exercise in the politics of *sending a message* ... (12, original emphasis)

In *chemical palace*, an advertisement for one of the group's upcoming parties (presented like an article published in the 'Fag Rag') apologetically asks punters to try to ignore the metal detectors and increased security personnel checking identification (110). These and other restrictions were beginning to heavily affect the lives of radical queers in the late 1990s.

McGregor protests against 'nanny state' regulation in NSW throughout her writing, and in many of her performances. In 2008, McGregor and artist Sarah-Jane Norman staged 'Revoluting'; an intervention at the Art Gallery of NSW in the 'Sydney 2008 Biennale' (31st August). The performance made comment on the tightly-regulated world of art, as well as the censorship of photographer Bill Henson's works representing nude adolescents, which had been recently confiscated by police at his exhibition. McGregor explains that the title of hers and Norman's work referred to the 'perspicacious comments of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd', who described Henson's images as 'revolting' (Elder para. 3). McGregor provides details of the performance on her *Myspace Blog*:

Dressed in curatorial black, red revolutionary berets and QANTAS eye-patches, the artists sat on the gallery floor, facing the wall, arms linked, for just over an hour. A placard taped on the floor behind named and dated the work.

... AGNSW security made repeated attempts to remove the artists, declaring 'You are not part of the art'. They took photographs and threatened to call the police. Guards formed a semi-circle around the performance to block it from view. A woman attempting to video was thrown out via the loading bay. (n. pag.)

The practice of inserting oneself into public space without permission is common to Anarchist and Situationist protest. This kind of theatrical protest practice has been employed by McGregor in her real-life performances and as a powerful motif in her writing. Increased control and regulation of life and leisure in *chemical palace* leads the characters to frustration; resulting in the occasional out-bursting onto the streets of their desire for freedom and self-determination. Both *chemical palace* and *FreeNRG* reveal that it is not isolated occurrences of carnivalesque culture in controlled environments, but the moments when it 'spills out', that

constitute the greatest challenge to the status quo. These are also, importantly, the greatest moments of joy. The following scene from *chemical palace* humorously demonstrates what can occur when radical queer culture spills out of the nightclub and onto the streets, coming into contact with a mainstream society in which it is seen as alien or 'freakish':

Often the best moments were found beside the main events. The incidental, unexpected, like the comic foil bearing the truth in disguise. So that while this year's Inquisition was unremarkable its aftermath endured. Coming out of the showgrounds drugfucked in full kit to find the city that Sunday morning overrun by an international marathon now halfway down Flinders Street. They stood there stunned as thousands of fit sweating bodies pounded past them, the street thick with athletes all the way to Taylor Square. Shifty in her cop uniform scored a wink from a bemused official. (99)

The brilliance of this image is in its representation of two antithetical sections of society which are both quite ridiculous and surreal in each other's eyes. The runners are passing through a part of society that still largely 'belongs' to the queer community and so, even though the runners are faced with a group of queers in colourful costumes, *they* – with their sweaty super-fit bodies, running for what is essentially no particular reason – are more freakish in the particular social context. It is an interesting inversion of the expected and a testament to McGregor's success in writing a book that normalises the 'freak community'.

At other times in the novel, the group take their carnivalesque spectacle to the streets in a way that is much more deliberate and political. Early in the narrative, they hold a birthday party for Turkish Jim, called 'Clone'; for which everyone has to come dressed as one of the other people in the group, chosen at random. Billy pulls Turkish Jim's name from the hat and decides to dress up in a conceptual costume – something that Turkish Jim could theoretically have created for himself:

She cut riveted glued and stitched an ankle-length dress of black rubber patchwork. Made a long headdress with the scraps, noded the cape with the plastic spools and wired the remainder end to end then attached them like snakes to the headdress. She called the costume Rubbishman and cued by Professor Bee made her entrance two blocks before the party venue, rising up out of a skip bobbing and quivering when Turkish arrived. It was Saturday afternoon, the streets full of people who stopped in wonder. So that even when the parties were small and private at some stage some part of them was shared with the public. The street was their stage. (39)

It is this revolutionary act of bringing theatricality out of the darkened theatre, down from the brightly lit stage to street level, that offers up the greatest challenge to the status quo. This scene continues McGregor's metaphor of the world as a stage but reinforces that it is an unrestricted, egalitarian, carnivalesque stage, rather than a traditional stage, which uses footlights and distance to separate actors and audience. The carnivalesque stage has no boundaries, no limits: there is no on-stage or off-stage; every participant is an actor and yet no one is acting. Bakhtin tells us that 'carnival does not know footlights' (7). In McGregor's 'rubbishman' scene, the *unusual* is thrown without warning into the usual, contributing to the project of re-enchantment that is foremost for the scene's participants. When this kind of activity is brought out of the club and into the streets it is not just the participants who are changed. The appearance of the unusual in the urban environment unsettles all who view it, challenging them to see wonder in the everyday; to feel surprise and delight. The effect is similar to that caused by someone bursting into song on a crowded commuter train, except that when a group of people act in a way that is incongruous with context, they cannot be simply dismissed as solo eccentrics. These moments thrill and titillate observers because they

challenge our alienation within modern consumer society. This is the power of the carnivalesque.

These notions have been thoroughly explored in the work of Neil Ravenscroft and Paul Gilchrist, whose 'Spaces of transgression: governance, discipline and reworking the carnivalesque' proposes that Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque should not be applied to contemporary international carnivals. The authors argue that Bakhtin's work has been routinely *misapplied* by leisure academics who seek to employ it in reference to large festivals such as the New Orleans Mardi Gras or the San Fermines (the running of the bulls) (37-40). They clarify crucial components of Bakhtin's definition, explaining that these commodified tourist events are actually 'spectacle' not carnival, because:

... as Bakhtin has described, '... carnival does not know footlights' (1984, p. 7); it is a process of social production and reproduction; it is not staged, nor performed as a spectacle. Rather, it is a part of social life just like any other, apart from the fact that it happens in proscribed places and times and according to a modified social code of conduct. It thus bears little resemblance to contemporary spectacle, nor to the staged (in)authenticity of the interpretive festival so beloved of many leisure and tourism studies. (42)

While I would assert that 'performance' and 'spectacle' are more closely related to the carnivalesque than this interpretation allows, I support their critical assertion that carnival 'is a *part* of social life' [my emphasis] and is 'not staged, nor performed as a spectacle'. Ravenscroft and Gilchrist seek to differentiate between truly carnivalesque spaces, which are invested spaces, and the modern festival spectacles, which have been packaged for consumption. Returning to my earlier discussion of Bakhtin's claim that the carnivalesque is always saturated with ideology, we can see the authors' frustration with what they perceive to be the theory's misapplication. According to the authors, these festivals are sites largely driven by a commodification of the 'novel experience' of supposedly 'authentic' local customs and traditions (39). It is 'culture for sale' – a taste of a country's rituals and traditions offered up for a reasonable price. Criticising these festivals, Ravenscroft and Gilchrist elucidate that:

While purporting to grant a level of freedom beyond that which is normally acceptable, they [Ravenscroft and Matteucci 2003] argue that the heterotopia represents a liminal zone that offers neither genuine freedom nor genuine control. Instead, it offers the possibility of a temporary lifting of the 'moral curtain' followed by an embarrassed or guilty return to the moral code. (39)

This analysis of festivals is justified even if it is not applicable to every circumstance and every participant. The truly temporary, strictly limited and non-participatory nature of most large festivals (as least for outsiders who attend) denotes that they are not in fact carnivalesque spaces. Genuine carnivalesque spaces may provide a 'second world' but that world is *not* a novelty: it is an ongoing aspect of participants' lives that celebrates their traditions, and has spiritual and cultural significance for them. To participate in a carnival as a once-off consumer who has no connection to the significance of the event is to have an experience that is not carnivalesque.

While I support Ravenscroft and Gilchrist's general hypothesis regarding international carnivals, it must also be acknowledged that the definition of 'carnivalesque' is slippery to say the least. Its borders are easily blurred and often crumble. For example, the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras is an event which I would argue *is* carnivalesque for those who participate in the parade, but *is not* carnivalesque for (a majority of) the spectators. Accounts of the early parades reveal that there were once moments where sections of the crowd would run in and

become involved in the parade. This would represent a carnivalesque *moment* for the crowd. However, these moments have all but been eliminated with the growth of crowds, heavy policing, the use of barricades, and the increasing popularity of the parade amongst ‘straight’ revellers. Ravencroft and Gilchrist propose that rather than applying Bakhtin’s carnivalesque to the co-opted and commodified events they have reviewed, the theory is better suited to analysing the ‘playful deviance’ of ‘small-scale localised illicit practice’ (42). The ‘small-scale localised illicit practice’ they choose to present as an example of a contemporary carnivalesque is the practice of ‘dogging’: organised practices of having sex (or watching others have sex) in public places, such as parks or forests (42). Their discussion around this topic offers interesting insights into the carnivalesque as transgression. However, I do not see the practice of ‘dogging’ as strictly carnivalesque in the Bakhtinian sense. Ravencroft and Gilchrist propose that ‘dogging’ is carnivalesque because it represents an attempt by individuals to create a dissident leisure counter-culture:

The use of carnival as an interpretative device helps us to consider how participants construct their social practices as anti-hegemonic and subversive to the norms and values of outsiders and everyday society. ‘Dogging’ is just one activity that composes deviant uses of free time. As Rojek (1999, p. 82) reminds us, such practices are part of persisting forms of illegal or transgressive activity, contrary to the serious, productive, rational or progressive uses of free time. A number of leisure practices operate outside the mainstream and provide opportunities for self-expression, resistance, dissent and identity formation, both collective and individual. This is what Presdee (1994) and Redmon (2003) describe as ‘playful deviance’: leisure activities performed for – and with – others as a presentation of ‘secret’ self, with the secrecy maintained by the ‘moral curtain’ of carnivalesque inversion. (43)

‘Dogging’ is a carnivalesque activity in that it ‘provide[s] opportunities for self-expression, resistance, dissent and identity formation’, but it lacks the humour and theatricality associated with most carnivalesque cultural practices. The practice is *too* localised; it is too private and does not involve the ‘entire world’ (Bakhtin *Rabelais* 7). Of course no event involves the entire world in any literal sense, but carnival invites any willing participant to attend and it works on an ideological level to celebrate the ‘world’s revival and renewal’ (7). The humour Bakhtin associates with carnival is theatrical and debased; it appeals to the lowest common denominators of human experience – eating, defecating and fornication. The self-expression of carnivalesque spaces is the expression of humanity through the exaggerated and the grotesquely comic. These features of the carnivalesque are not readily associated with a clandestine practice such as ‘dogging’, despite the myriad other ways in which the practice does fit the definition. Furthermore, a significant percentage of Bakhtin’s interest in carnival is directed towards the people’s laughter: the carnival exists in large part to create joy and a life-affirming sense of merriment.

Alternatively, the microcultures represented in *chemical palace* are both transgressive and theatrical. Like ‘dogging’, radical dance parties also incorporate ‘persisting forms of illegal or transgressive activity, contrary to the serious, productive, rational or progressive uses of free time’ (43). They are also spaces in which countercultural identities are forged and strengthened. Ravencroft and Gilchrist claim that the ‘temporary’ and contingent nature of carnivalesque spaces makes them ultimately ‘apolitical’:

The coming of carnival denoted a time at which individuals became constituted as a collective. But this collective identity was a temporary performative condition, which may have given the appearance of a revolutionary multitude, whereas in effect, and most significantly, it lacked any political agency. (37)

I disagree with this assertion. The radical dance parties McGregor represents spawn ideas and networks that effect *real* change in the lives of individuals. Relationships form in these spaces that lead to lasting artistic and political collaborations. Participants in radical queer culture rarely seek to produce broader political change, and they are not setting out to overthrow the social order. They create spaces which are *culturally*-revolutionary. It is true that their economic and political participation in society (as citizens) is still governed by a straight bureaucracy that they can neither escape nor infiltrate, but their cultural life, values, standards and tastes are their own to define in this DIY/O culture. Some may construe radical queer culture as an apolitical individualist counterculture, as compared with other radical subcultures whose adherents may indeed strive to change the world, and in fact, from Medieval feasts to today's bush doofs, it is fair to say that the carnivalesque has never constituted a political strategy. Like McGregor, I do not claim that carnivalesque spaces and experiences could bring about broad long term social change. I do, however, maintain that these events are instrumental in shaping and re-shaping the unorthodox cultures that spawn them. Furthermore, radical queer microculture leaves a lasting legacy on the art world, influences the fashions and aesthetics of leisure cultures and transforms the lives of participants in a profoundly empowering manner. Finally, the study of these cultures is important because they are an inimitable part of the history of queer Sydney.

Different social relations

The main scenes I have discussed thus far may seem to represent very disparate examples of carnival. The first: the dance floor scene in which the crowd are led by Mr Hyde, depicts the characters engaged in surrender to music and the crowd, becoming part of a *leisure machine*. The second: the 'rubbishman' scene, conveys the pleasures of artifice and the communal empowerment that comes through reclaiming public space. While these seem very different, both examples demonstrate pursuit of the same ultimate goal – that of breaking-down the barriers of alienation. In the first, dancers work to break down barriers within and around the self and between self and others, and in the second they work to break down barriers between public and private, as well as those between the everyday and the extraordinary. Costume, or 'dress-ups' as McGregor says, can facilitate a further breaking down of barriers. Dressing up is not necessarily about narcissism or ego; though it is often portrayed that way and quickly dismissed. Characters in the novel suggest that the reason they feel freer and more empowered when they are dressed up is because the costume gives them 'escape' from their ego and personal history, as if they have become something more universal. The first time traffic wears the court jester outfit made for her by Billy it is described as an epiphany:

Like everyone she had performed before. She had pulled looks and moved through dancefloors enhanced and altered. But nothing this developed, nothing this refined, nothing that went so far from herself that the circle kept turning till it rejoined her core. Viewed by all as the court jester not traffic, she had been liberated, as inside a wig and scant costumes when stripping. The whole party was now her stage and she moved through the dancers free from the flaws and history and responsibilities of traffic, accountable to no one, amusing to everyone. (90)

The phrase 'dress-ups' evokes childhood play, and childhood is associated with creativity, enchantment and a sense of freedom lost with adult responsibility. Children also function with less inhibition and divisions between each other, and more readily imagine themselves 'in someone else's shoes'. Costume and artifice is simply another way in which The Chemical Palace, like all carnivalesque spaces, breaks down barriers within the self, and between the self and others. McGregor employs the image of a circle when talking about traffic's court

jester outfit: the costume is so far removed from traffic's usual appearance that it frees her from herself ('from the flaws and history and responsibilities of traffic') while also expressing her perfectly ('the circle kept turning till it rejoined her core'). This image is pivotal in the novel. It demonstrates that through carnivalesque self-expression, McGregor's characters allow opposites and binaries to exist together as part of a coherent whole. This wholeness is a remedy for alienation. We begin to see resonances with Marxist perceptions of the conditions of man under capitalism, especially in the concept of 'wholeness', with which Marx was often concerned. McGregor too is concerned with the idea of individual and collective wholeness: the pursuit of the sensation of being filled with joy and reconnecting with all that is primal and human.

Bakhtin privileged the all-important process within carnivalesque spaces whereby barriers between citizens are broken down and social protocols are suspended:

... during carnival there is a temporary suspension of all hierarchic distinctions and barriers among men and of certain norms and prohibitions of usual life. We added that an ideal and at the same time real type of communication, impossible in ordinary life is established. (15-16)

We see a similar process taking place in radical dance party culture, whether it be in the anonymity of losing oneself into the mechanics of a heaving dance floor, or the freedom of exploring self-potentialities through costume. This process cannot be simplified as either a communal or an individual experience; at its best the dance party is a revelation in both spheres. Referring to the importance of dance party spaces during the HIV/AIDS crisis, Race says:

What if we were to understand the dance party not as the transparent radiation of community, but as a mediated event through which a sense of community was hallucinated? The massed bodies, decorations, lights, drugs, costumes, and music combined to produce a powerful and widely accessed perception of presence, belonging, shared circumstance and vitality at a time when the image of the gay man, dying alone, ostracized from family, was the publicly proffered alternative. (*Pleasure* 22)

Race's claim that the individual's interaction with the queer nightclub space has broader social and communal ramifications supports the idea that dance parties are indeed a modern example of the carnivalesque. In the carnivalesque space, it is not possible to separate individual and communal experiences, and it is precisely this ambiguity that makes them so transformative. Davidson refers to it as 'at once a wholeness and a splitting, at once an experience of individuality and commonality' ('Golden' 7).

The carnivalesque space can engender a reunification of the self, and a wholeness consistent with the Marxist aim of escaping alienation. Of the democracy that characterises carnivalesque spaces, Bakhtin writes:

The hierarchical background and the extreme corporative and caste divisions of the medieval social order were exceptionally strong. Therefore such free, familiar contacts were deeply felt and formed an essential element of the carnival spirit. People were, so to speak, reborn for new, purely human relations. These truly human relations were not only a fruit of imagination or abstract thought; they were experienced. ... The utopian ideal and the realistic merged in this carnival experience, unique of its kind (10).

Carnival dissolves class distinctions; or at least sidelines them. All carnivalesque spaces are designed to manifest a sense of transcending the everyday, including class hierarchies and other factors that separate human beings in the work-a-day world. As Race explains, the drug

Ecstasy is particularly associated with club culture because of its ability to encourage empathetic feelings:

Ecstasy, or methylenedioxyamphetamine, releases large amounts of serotonin (the neurotransmitter said to control mood) into the synapses, increasing serotonin receptor binding and leading to significant changes in the brain's electrical firing. Though culturally and individually variable, its 'most predictable feelings are empathy, openness, peace and caring' [53] – feelings of relaxed euphoria, belonging and interpersonal understanding, and emotional warmth. At dance parties people took ecstasy, bonded, hugged one another and felt community spirit. (*Pleasure* 23)

This is why Ecstasy has played such an important role in dance party culture generally, and queer dance party culture more specifically, where the need to foster a sense of community in the face of homophobia and HIV/AIDS has been paramount. However, the effects of carnival are not caused simply by drugs or alcohol – to reduce the carnival to simple substance use is to do the phenomenon a major injustice. Carnavalesque spaces promote a temporary abandonment of differences such as class (and, in *chemical palace*, sexual orientation and gender presentation) in order to facilitate an egalitarian spirit. These effects are not predicated upon the consumption of drugs, although it does aid the process for those not already comfortable with 'letting go'. In events of *The Chemical Palace* attempts are made to equalise participation and access, such as charging on a 'sliding scale' for entry into events. Furthermore, differences in sex, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and beliefs are publicly celebrated and (at least in theory) respected. Individuals often report to feel 'uninhibited' and 'free' in relation to other human beings, with barriers seeming to dissolve for the time-span of the event. This is the express aim of carnivalesque party spaces, and an aim that continues into the daily lives of McGregor's characters.

Radical queers employ 'various modes of performance' (Davidson 'Minor' 140) in pursuit of these aims, borrowing aesthetics and symbolism from numerous communities and scenes. In *chemical palace*, for instance, many of the female characters are involved in sex work, mostly mistress (dominatix) work or stripping. These are areas of the sex work industry that are particularly performative, and conventions from these industries pepper the performances in *chemical palace*. Modes of performance depicted in *chemical palace* represent a complex language of social signs derived from gay and straight cultural sources – from old style camp to punk. Most of the characters participate in complex dress-ups and impromptu spontaneous performative behaviour, such as in the following scene. Here we observe performance being used as a style of communication between strangers, creating temporary associations:

Cleveland Street, 5 pm, traffic and Billy emerge from a recovery party. traffic's due at work so they wait for a cab. There are two bears across the road in matching leather shirts and jeans, long grey square-cut beards like bush rangers. ... The bears seem to be waiting for a cab too. There are none. They all wait, checking each other out. ... All four now laughing at each other through the cars and busses. Billy waving her bustle, traffic opening her coat and lying back seductively on the nearest car bonnet, the bears responding with crotch-grabbing and lewd grins. ... (99)

In this example, performative behaviour and distinctive costuming facilitate the establishment of *like* identities. Even though the costumes and identities are very different (radical queer women/bears¹⁵), the unique modes of performance communicate the fact that the four share related social identities as radical alternative queer people. Very early in the novel we are told

¹⁵ 'Bears' are larger hairy gay men. They often embrace 'leather' fashions, such as harnesses and 'chaps'.

that for McGregor's characters performance 'was a habit a custom a way of life. Performance was life itself' (27). In the above example we observe that performance is also a kind of *code*, a familiar language, and a marker of belonging.

A fascinating feature of the carnivalesque that necessitates discussion is its all-consuming nature, its *intensity*, which to a large extent accounts for the popularity of carnivalesque spaces. Bakhtin reveals that:

While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part. (7)

Certainly the same can be applied to the radical queer dance party: at its best it is a revelatory experience, providing a uniquely intense sense of celebrating humanity and being alive. However, we must also understand that this is an ideal and one that is not always realised on the scene. No matter how careful organisers are to create a tolerant and respectful space and a safe space for all participants to enjoy the 'revival and renewal' that it offers, they cannot remove all discrimination and violence, nor separate this utopian space from a social context in which difference is so often a handicap. During the HIV/AIDS crisis, queer dance parties sought to provide

... a pursuit of intensified experientiality, in which the pleasures of the self are appreciably bound up in the nature and quality of relations with others – in practices of care, hope, memory, dance, excitement, transformation, and disclosure. (Race *Pleasure* 24)

Radical dance party spaces gesture towards a similar ultimately utopian aim, and in doing so they provide a space that allows participants to imagine a freer, better world. Rarely would promoters or supporters of radical dance party spaces claim that these spaces perform an activist role or seek to challenge authorities or governments in an overtly political way. They do, however, provide an innovative experience of social relations, not based on capitalist criteria, and also a space in which work, play, leisure and labour are inverted, complicated and redefined. All dance party spaces purport to offer this to some degree, and indeed they all offer it 'in the moment', but radical dance party culture also offers an antidote to alienation through work – through *un*-alienated labour.

Work/play in the carnivalesque context

Perhaps the most interesting area of inquiry into the carnivalesque is in its inversions and perversions of the idea of work. Neither a Medieval carnival nor a modern dance party can exist without organisation, effort and the physical and creative work of participants. It is the claim of this thesis, and Bakhtin's ideas support this claim, that 'work' in the carnivalesque context is of a vastly different nature to capitalist labour. Essential to *chemical palace* are the concepts of work and play: McGregor tells us that '[t]he work and play thing is FUNDAMENTAL' (Int. 1.). 'Play' is the name given by practitioners of BDSM to the performance of various BDSM practises between consenting adults; for example, 'knife play', or 'animal play'. In this context the word 'play' sets the tone for safe, negotiated fun during which possibilities for joy and pleasure are exploited. Participants act *as* themselves, by which I mean that even during specified role-play they are not playing a character (like an actor), but are exploring different ways of expressing their own personalities and multiple parts of themselves. This is a common misconception about BDSM and sexual role-playing. The performance culture represented in *chemical palace* has clear and close ties with genuine

BDSM culture. Some of the performers even make their living doing BDSM sex work, and many of the performances include either real or simulated BDSM acts; such as the insertion and removal of play-piercing needles into traffic's skin in the 'puppet show':

The puppeteer in huge goofy glasses, an oversized suit the sleeves rolled up, hair demented by pipe cleaners. She pierced swiftly and deftly, tugging into motion the puppeteer's legs, belly, arms then shoulders. Billy and Roger moved forward when the puppeteer attached the final strings to a dowel overhead, pulling traffic upright so they saw her face at last flooded with the bliss of pain. And the febrile soundtrack of Mr Hyde building to a climax as traffic reached for the scissors and cut the strings one by one, Bee's surprise and wonder beating through the puppeteer like the heart revealed in surgery. Billy watching traffic now from behind her brother as traffic came to life cut herself adrift and spun across the stage to her freedom. (161)

This recital allows traffic, and her audience, to explore notions of (en)slavery and freedom. In doing this show, traffic is a debutant, making her debut into a career of performance which leads her to specialise in juggling and trickery.

Ley's statement that characters of *chemical palace* 'they take their fun very seriously indeed' begins to hint at breaking down binaries such as those of work and leisure (par. 4). Even though Ley means the comment to be somewhat derisive, it is accurate in the context of The Chemical Palace, where play is an arena through which people explore who they are, and how they can relate to each other. As well as the work that goes into preparing costumes and performances, organising and promoting the parties, DJing, and creating an aesthetic for the party through decoration and lighting, there are also more ambiguous forms of work going on: these are in the arena of the spectacle, such as 'showing off' or 'working it' on the dance floor to the delight of viewers. The activities that make up a dance party involve the kinds of physical and creative efforts that are harnessed by capitalists in the production of goods, the provision of services and the pursuit of profit under capitalism. It is however the fact that these activities are undertaken out of passion and self-motivated desire, and exist entirely outside of the system of labour and profit, that complicates their definition – these activities constitute work and play simultaneously.

Bertell Ollman's analysis of Marx's theory of alienation (1976) is particularly pertinent to questions of work/play in the carnivalesque context. He tells us that in the context of capitalist society the relationship of man to his efforts (work, labour... even creativity) are subject to 'separation and distortion' (135). Ollman understands 'work' to be important, *productive* human activity:

During productive activity, however, all man's powers are engaged to a greater or lesser extent. According to Marx, the 'working up of objects' to satisfy man's material life purposes requires planning, skilful effort and concentration. We must have some notion of what we want beforehand, know how to make it, and be able to concentrate on its production. No other activity demands as much. (98)

He goes on to say that: 'Productive activity is further related to the individual's powers in establishing new possibilities, in extending the boundaries in nature, for their fulfilment' (99). Employing Marx's definition of work, as articulated by Ollman, it is possible to see carnivalesque partying – its activities and performances, its costumes and consumptions – as ambiguously productive, but *not* alienated. The activities of partying are not directly related to survival or the fulfilment of a community's basic needs, but by Ollman's definition, preparing for and executing the dance party event is productive activity – work. But what kind of work is it? Wage-labour under capitalism, according to Ollman, expends man's energy for the benefit

of the capitalist, and under conditions that leave the individual alienated from the products of his labour and without say in the conditions under which he toils. According to Ollman, Marxism argues that man's 'productive activity both expends man's powers and develops them', and that only under communism can the positive potential of this process be fully realised (101). Under communism man would theoretically not be alienated from the reasons for his labour or the fruits of it. This un-alienated labour is called 'self activity' (101) or, at another point 'species life activity' (114). Ollman says that besides being free and 'conscious, this activity will also be willed, purposive, physically and mentally flexible, concentrated and social' (114). The activities described by McGregor in *chemical palace* as the work which goes into preparing for dance parties can all be understood to be 'self activity' and un-alienated labour. It is precisely because these activities exist alongside capitalism, but consciously resist subsumption into its system and processes, that they allow participants an experience (even if temporarily) of the joys of work that Marx suggests are only possible for man under communism.

McGregor's characters, Billy and Turkish Jim are most noted for their efforts in costume-making, which bring joy to themselves and awe to those who view them. Jim's most dramatic work is his 'two-headed monster', an ambitious sculptural costume created for a Mardi Gras party, in which Jim attempts to investigate and communicate the complexities of being in a long-term relationship. The following excerpt reveals the level of effort required to achieve such an ambitious project and the deep satisfaction involved with this kind of self-expression:

He carved from polystyrene a tapered torso that fitted against his back, the shoulders enormous looming over his own. Made a series of belts to secure it. From foam rubber he fashioned arms that locked across his chest pinning his own arms to his sides. Pulled apart his military jacket and using the pattern as a template cut another to fit both himself and the clone. The head and face took a week to carve, its features modelled on his own. Each day thereafter Jim applied a layer of liquid latex, carefully dyed, building the skin to a fleshy sheen, the scattering of pockmarks on the polystyrene disappearing to just a few acne scars. ... Jim loved Harry and everything he was trying to do with his art but loathed his need for public approval, Harry in turn never forgave Jim for giving up a potentially successful career as a sculptor... (105)

Contextualising the costume in this way allows McGregor to convey more than the superficial spectacle. The loving depth with which McGregor obsessively details Jim's efforts to create his masterpiece articulates the author's preoccupation with the work of the carnivalesque. The novel then describes Jim's experience of wearing the costume through the entire party, where he encounters praise, amazement, and even disgust for his creation. Finally, because of his efforts, he attracts the friendship of the girls: Billy, Bee and Shifty end up becoming long-term friends and admirers of Jim after his creation encourages free and enthusiastic communication between himself and the unknown girls. Speaking of man's activities within the communist context, Ollman's following statement can be applied with salient precision to Jim's creative magnum opus:

In communism, consciousness entails alertness, and the individual is aware of the complexities of what he is doing, including its manifold relations to himself and to other people and things. Man's activities are always purposive, but in communism the plan setting is more conscious, more creatively enjoyable, and the plan itself grander than ever before. (114)

Furthermore, the tension between Harry and Jim over Jim's refusal to seek social status and economic gain through his talent for sculpture conveys a tension apparent in all the characters' lives; a tension between participating in the mainstream working world and repudiating it.

Now that we have established that there are kinds of work evident in *chemical palace* that do not capitulate to the capitalist model of alienated labour, what then are work and play in the context of carnival? Bakhtin says

... the basic carnival nucleus of this culture [Medieval Carnival culture] is by no means a purely artistic form nor a spectacle and does not, generally speaking, belong to the sphere of art. It belongs to the borderline between art and life. In reality, it is life itself, but shaped according to a certain pattern of play. (7)

This excerpt illuminates an imperative feature of the work/play dynamic; the idea that the effort, performance and play of the carnival is embodied. Bakhtin claims that for participants in carnival culture, efforts in the areas of the artistic and dramatic cannot be viewed strictly as performance, as the performers are performing themselves. What participants are doing in the carnival context is not acting, is not art but 'life itself', expressed through a form of serious or meaningful play. This concept is articulated through Slip's relationship to her DJing. The following excerpt explains DJing as un-alienated work, involving effort and concentration:

She went up to Sydney to attend a basic workshop then started to play with her small record collection, to slot the tracks into one long movement. It was a different way to make music. The ears got tired. You could complain of a sore back as with the long café hours, but Slip was accustomed to working standing up. There weren't however the excuses of unfamiliar fingering of slack embouchure, the music didn't rely on the pulley system of tendons or depth of lungs. Sleight of hand, yes, and memory infinite memory, the minute quantities of each notch on each dial for each nuance in each track storing slowly inside her fingertips. But the demands of DJing were placed first and last on the ears, and the imagination in between them. (83)

In keeping with the Marxist ideal of un-alienated labour, Slip's efforts to become a DJ involve concentration and hard work, as well as both expending her creative and physical energies and developing them. These activities are also deeply fulfilling and satisfying. Ollman tells us that during work in the context of un-alienated communist labour, where man works for himself under conditions of his own making, 'he has at last gotten beneath appearances to essences' (115). The incredible power and potential of work is recognised. Man is empowered by expressing his energy and creativity in an un-cynical context. This is the outcome of work and play in the carnivalesque space.

Explaining her love of toiling as DJ, Slip articulates that the work of DJing is also play to her: 'To make one sound, one word, that took in its opposite and the spectrum in between. To play.' (74) This ambitious and idealistic creative urge drives participants in radical queer cultural spaces to engage in the work and play we see represented in McGregor's novel. Likewise, it motivates organisers of this culture in the actual scene. In the following excerpt from *chemical palace*, the narrator describes the characters preparing for their second party, SCUM:

No sleep, no rest, no time out in the buildup to the party. Press release, ad placement, the endless phone calls confirming these, fending off frustration when they were erroneously published or not published at all, the endless phone calls confirming performers, negotiations with other promoters over dates, searching for a projector to replace Fred's broken one, the journeys through bars clubs and parties to hand out flyers. But the excitement of strangers when handed a flyer, their raves about the first

party. Out after dark spraypainting footpaths, traffic in hysterics fleeing at the sight of a cop car, stencil flapping in the wind splattering paint down her jeans. (77)

The extended list of activities here creates a lively rhythm suggesting a busy workday. The statement '[n]o sleep, no rest, no time out' communicates a compelling sense of purpose and work ethic. The reference is deliberate; most of the activities listed resemble tasks associated with working in industry, and the author is presenting the activities like typical paid work quite consciously. The comparison is complicated by the image of traffic running from the police whilst 'spraypainting footpaths' with the logo for the party. In this image readers are reminded that these events exist outside of respectable society and occupy a complex position alongside the mainstream entertainment industry. The image is a reminder of the alternative and outlawed nature of the The Chemical Palace. McGregor is careful, however, to describe traffic as running 'in hysterics' to demonstrate the immense joy involved in preparing for these events. This juxtaposition challenges the preconceived conflation of breaking the law with dark and violent moods and behaviours. McGregor's writing combines simple images and colloquial language ('their raves about the first party') with a busy progressive rhythm to effectively demonstrate that preparing for parties *is* work, but is also fun – a labour of love.

The activities involved in preparing for parties constitute ambiguously productive forms of work. The work of preparing for parties is generally sidelined or ignored in mainstream representations of party culture because it interrupts the popular image of dance party as oblivious hedonism. Nevertheless, dance party spaces impart effects that are 'materially productive' (Race *Pleasure* 20), and The Chemical Palace is as much a space of work as it is of play. Certain forms of work are classified as less productive within a system that privileges profit over experience, and the saleable object over the ephemeral cultural product which may only exist temporarily. Economic rationalist perspectives can only construct the action of exerting effort and energy into creating not-for-profit dance parties, costume and unpaid performance as 'unproductive work', or as a 'hobby'. Hobbies, in an economic rationalist view, are something one puts time into that does not contribute to the system of trade and moneys, cannot be bought or sold, and is therefore not work, but play. However, in the context of radical queer cultural production, art and performance have *currency*, and work and play are rarely separable. Redefining work and play is one of the most important projects of McGregor's novel. As McGregor demonstrates in *chemical palace*, through their involvement in radical queer dance party projects, her characters are able to actively experience 'working' in a non-capitalist context, a context in which all sorts of conditions of labour under capitalism do not apply. They are not compelled to devote the time and energy they devote to these activities, they complete this work because each individual extracts something essential and beneficial from it. Because the energy, creativity, intelligence, and occupation of individuals in this context is not dedicated towards the generation of profit, new sets of criteria emerge by which this work can and must be judged as productive. Success is judged on: the intensity of experience provided for attendees; the levels of satisfaction obtained by being involved; the quality of the space created; and the merits of the dialogue and new ideas that emerged. Success, instead of being quantified by net profit, amount of people employed in production or the potential for the generation of further profit through related events, is qualified by criteria such as inspiration, transcendence, innovation, and the contribution to a resonant and lasting sensation of communality. We come again to Marxism in consideration of this argument, as interpreted by Ollman, who elucidates:

'[o]nly in community with others has each individual the means of cultivating his gifts in all directions; only in community, therefore, is personal freedom possible.' By community Marx has in mind a sincere and multi-faceted relationship binding each

individual to everyone else in his society. Such a bond can only come into existence after all artificial barriers to the mutual involvement of people have been torn down. (116)

McGregor, and others who speak of the project of radical queer dance party culture, articulate this very desire.

The scene described in *chemical palace* wilfully preferences the temporary over the permanent, and is engrossed with that which *cannot* be canonised, commodified or sold. McGregor seduces the reader by reconfiguring the value of uninhabited buildings, which are 'beautiful in their neglect, enticing as ballgowns worn for an evening then discarded' (361). There is poignancy and beauty in the transitory nature of that which has been abandoned. Images like the above communicate the affiliation of the radical queer scene to 'trash' culture. It is a culture of bricolage; a collection of styles and customs collected from across time. It is also a culture of environmentalist bricolage; with its focus on re-use and recycling. One is reminded of camp's appropriation of objects and manners that have been cast-off as refuse by mainstream consumer society, no longer seen as valuable within the capitalist system. In his 2002 study of Marxism and camp, Matthew Tinkom introduces the reader to similar processes in queer cinema (Durham and London: Duke UP). Tinkom explicates how some commodities betray 'the knowledge that they [are] destined to become 'useless'', explaining camp's fascination with these objects foregrounds its radical relationship to objects and culture (9). The relationship is radical because the value of objects is determined by criteria entirely alien to economic rationalism, and even to the economies of reproduction and family.

Tinkom illuminates Marx's fundamental failure to make a 'distinction between labor and work' (11). This distinction is key to understanding the kind of work represented in *chemical palace*. Tinkom's clarification is useful in analysing McGregor's construction of work as play (and play as work) in the carnivalesque context of radical queer dance party:

... the nexus of labor-commodity-money-value has another feature of queer subject's life that accompanies it – that of the frivolousness, the lack of apparent seriousness, that which we might call 'play' and which Hannah Arendt called 'work'. (11)

Tinkom distinguishes 'work' from 'labour', arguing that only some people can know work and its rewards because most people are bound up in labour and its compulsions (11). Tinkom also tells us that 'work appears in the acts by which humans create for themselves something outside of themselves' (11). This broad definition sits well with the artist's typical use of the word 'work' – to describe the pieces of cultural production they create. For radical queers involved in the dance party culture McGregor represents, the ultimate aim is often no more (or less) profound than the pursuit of 'free work'. Employing Tinkom's distinction, we are able to separate work from labour in a manner more satisfying than the problematic notion of productivity can offer. Ollman brings into play Marx's 'realm of necessity' and 'realm of freedom' to categorise man's meaningful activities. He tells us that art, music and theatre belong in the realm of freedom (116). In other words, they are work, but not labour, as they do not occupy the realm of necessity. However, for McGregor's characters art and performance are so intrinsic to their sense of self that they come to inhabit realms of necessity as much as realms of freedom. The complex and intense relationship of radical queers to art and artifice (certainly in the 1990s) is the result of a rich history of homophobia, resistance, celebration, and a sometimes life-and-death struggle to assert queer identities in an unsympathetic world.

Marx included procreation in his construction of man's (sic) realm of necessity; an inclusion that is problematic for gay, lesbian, bisexual and queer individuals. It is not my

project to analyse Marx's view on sexuality and I will not review it in any depth. I would, however, like to suggest that sexual activity and sexual expression can be considered to fit (perhaps problematically) into the realm of necessity, even though in queer contexts they are not generally linked to procreation. If Marx included procreation in the realm of necessity, it is not inconceivable to also include love, companionship and the physical expression of affection in this realm. In a queer context, then, the equivalent relations and expressions of human behaviour must also be considered to belong to a realm of necessity. If we accept this idea, and take into account the historical repression of queer sexualities, identities and activities, then we begin to see how the performance of queer sexuality and identity in night club contexts could be experienced as, and felt to be, *necessary* and meaningful in the lives of queer individuals. By extension, the efforts behind these activities can be understood to be work, rather than simply play. Tinkom argues that:

Although queer men are largely not exempt from the conditions of labor, this book [*Working Like a Homosexual*] argues that their work is often disguised precisely through what Arendt calls its 'playfulness' and through other forms of negation to labor – laziness, lack of seriousness, indifference to the formal logics of the popular commodity. (13)

So, what is often constructed as self-indulgence, play or simply spectacle, is actually the queer person's hard-working attempt to remove him/herself from the 'realm of estrangement' (Ollman 132) to which s/he has been relegated not once, but twice – both by the universal conditions of capitalism and by the double-alienation s/he faces as a non-straight individual in an ostensibly straight world.

In *chemical palace*, McGregor's characters seek only what is sought in Marxist ideology for all men – the confiscation of their own socially-imposed states of alienation. Ollman tells us that alienation disconnects man from his work and from other men:

Man is spoken of as being separated from his work (he plays no part in deciding what or how to do it) – a break between the individual and his life activity. Man is said to be separated from his own products (he has no control over what he makes or what becomes of it afterwards) – a break between the individual and the material world. He is also said to be separated from his fellow men (competition and class hostility has rendered most forms of cooperation impossible) – a break between man and himself. (133-4)

In the case of queer people within a heterosexist social order, non-heteronormative actions and behaviours and non-normative gender presentations can further alienate the queer individual from broader society. In losing that relationship to the social order and his or her contemporaries, the queer individual is alienated from his or her humanity, therefore s/he is alienated from a part of them-self. Any process of reunification with the self – through a project which explores one's relation to the realm of necessity while rejecting subsumption into the capitalist order – is a project that sees participants working for their own freedom and un-alienation, as well as that of others. As this project will demonstrate, it is the aim of participants on the radical queer dance party scene to break through alienation – alienation from *self*, from self-activity, and from other people. In pursuit of this aim techniques of play are effective for engaging in meaningful and all-important work.

Connections... intensities... machines

McGregor's novel is a kaleidoscope of images communicated through short snap-shot scenes. The narrative seems to meander and lack direction, but, in fact, the carnival ethos behind the

characters' pursuit of fabulousness drives the narrative in a coherent forward motion. While McGregor was unfamiliar with Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque when she wrote *chemical palace*, she has since agreed that it encompasses the spirit of the scene that she endeavoured to represent (Int. 1.). I do not wish to subordinate the text to the theory, as there is infinitely more in McGregor's novel than Bakhtin's carnivalesque can expose. I use the theory only as a tool to plug *chemical palace* into the context of the universal phenomena of merriment and joy through carnivalesque partying. Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque when applied to radical queer dance party culture does justice to the universal elation and humanity associated with these spaces. While there are certainly other ways of conceptualising the radical dance party space, understanding the nightclub as carnival allows us to plug the culture in McGregor's novel into a long history of eminent party phenomena, providing a solid theoretical base from which I may take my next lines of flight in this exploration.

3. Sydney is the essence

Sydney. Hectic. Unplanned, unpredictable. The long, hot, late summer days. Twisted streets densely parked, overhung with paper-barks. Sudden birdsong, sudden rainfall, sudden views across vacant lots and down sudden hills. You never knew what was around the corner. (*chemical palace* 358)

In constructing *chemical palace*, McGregor has drawn on the intensities of her life. Her passion for music and dance in carnivalesque spaces is rendered with aplomb, and so is her passion for the city of Sydney. The author grew up in Sydney and considers it her heartland. Her images of the city are vibrant, seething and alive: like carnival, the city thrills and excites! Popular images of carnival are inseparable from their association with dense crowds and chaos. The spirit of carnival is captured in images of large groups of people dancing together in an anonymous throng. There is parity between this image of carnival, the dance floor, and images of the metropolis. Cities are alive and teeming with unidentified human forms, scurrying around tightly-packed industry and architecture. Like carnival, the city appears as a chaos with its own laws and logic. Cities are feared just as they are adored. Literature and films offer contradictory images of the city: a heartless and cruel machine, or a gay metropolis filled with possibility. McGregor's *chemical palace* explores this dynamic in relation to her home city of Sydney, which plays a pivotal role in *chemical palace*. Her representation of the complexity of the characters' relationships to Sydney is the greatest triumph of McGregor's novel, and through *their* relationships to the city we see the author's *own* develop. She writes:

After more than a year of northern hemisphere pallor traffic returned to the soft riot of late summer Sydney. These were the days of magic and wonder. Cockatoos drowning out Darlinghurst conversations. Redfern paperbarks shrill with lorikeets, the dawn and dusk skies with their black paths of fruit bats. The softness of the air the tap water the sea, the harshness of colour everywhere. The city was alive, it was seething. (8)

This poetic extract, near the beginning of McGregor's novel, is a characteristic example of the personification of the city that continues throughout the book. The city (always female), with her softness and cruelty, banality and explosions, functions like a character in the text. It is not possible to understand the contribution of McGregor's second novel without exploring the seminal role of Sydney in *chemical palace*, as well as the author's personal relationship to her home-city. To facilitate this exploration, the Situationist ideas and practices of psychogeography are an appealing theoretical frame, plugging easily into McGregor's rendering of place. However, McGregor's Sydney also recalls and interacts with a history of established literary images of the sometimes infamous city, and to analyse this further it is useful to make comparisons with Ruth Park's *Companion Guide to Sydney* (Sydney: Collins, 1973), quoted at the beginning of *chemical palace*, and John Birmingham's *Leviathan* (Milsons Point: Random House, 1999). Both of these texts vividly depict Sydney as a city that encompasses countless contradictions; a city of beauty and corruption, opulence and poverty, leisure and despair.

Park describes Sydney in a playful and affectionate manner, revealing her wise and knowing fondness for the city:

Blithe, irresponsible, slightly mad, she has air full of electric sparks, her birds shout out in boys' voices, the sunshine is here more often and lasts longer. And even when the bushfire lights her domestic facades as though for some hellish *son et lumiere*, you feel it's right, characteristic somehow, Sydney. (11)

Birmingham's *Leviathan* also speaks of being bewitched by the chaos and contradiction of the city, as evidenced in the title of his book, and its implications, which are expressed in the novel's epigraph – an extract from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*:

There Leviathan

hugest of living creatures, on the deep
stretched like a promontory sleeps or swims,
and seems a moving land...

This comparison of the mythical serpent to a land is inverted by Birmingham to create the powerful metaphor of a city of monolithic proportions and mythical dimensions; a huge seething living being. It is a *virus* upon the land, a cancer which cannot be contained, removed or understood. Birmingham depicts a Sydney that has a life of its own; a city constructed from tangled stories that interweave to form its past and present. The stories he observes are conflicting and dramatic. 'Sydney' is a place (a geographical space with buildings and landscapes) *and* an idea. It is a complex vision in the national imagination. However, Birmingham's Sydney is an infinitely darker place than McGregor's. McGregor's Sydney builds upon Park's and Birmingham's images of the city as a bright chaos, but also offers its own insights. McGregor's Sydney is the playground of misfits, a glittering stage for drama-queers, and a place where you may fall into the cracks, get eaten alive or, alternatively, rise up in glory. It is a place of crucifixion and salvation; a place to get lost or found. The city is alive and changing – emergent, reforming, transfiguring and evolving. McGregor's *chemical palace* is a testament to her desire to truly represent the city – a task she feels is impossible but insanely tempting ('Mutant' 228).

John Birmingham's Sydney

Birmingham introduces the inextricable multiplicity of the city early in his book:

Conceived of as a place where people would go and never come back, it has grown alongside eruptions of insensate violence, oppression and dislocation elsewhere in the world. Asian wars, European wars, Middle Eastern wars, depressions, recessions, pogroms and revolutions, all have delivered millions of travellers and refugees into the fetid holds of small boats and the uncertain mercies of the open sea. Across thousands of miles, down through hundreds of years they have arrived willingly or otherwise, fleeing or cast out of one home and forced to build another. Some have amassed fantastic wealth, some have died broken and alone. It is the nature of individual stories to vary so. However, it is the common threads weaving through the city's tapestry which stand out. The way the stories of Cockney pickpockets, Irish rebels, German Jews, Italian fishermen and Vietnamese schoolteachers all wind through and around each other in recurring patterns. (13)

Is it from these 'common threads' that history is written? *Leviathan* presents a view rarely exposed in history lessons; a darker story of the violence and corruption that plagued the city during most of its formative years. One can see the book as a cynical critique of Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan: The Matter, Forme and Power of a Common Wealth Ecclesiastical and Civil* (published in 1651), which proposes that the only way to avoid social chaos and permanent civil war is through a social contract which grants all power to a singular sovereign. Birmingham's *Leviathan* is testament to the impossibility of attaining Hobbes' ideal, demonstrating that even in supposedly civil society man functions in various 'states of nature'. Human cities cannot be tamed or controlled, and McGregor's *chemical palace* relishes this chaos, focussing on untold stories of the city's minorities and outlaws: its wayward youth, queers, drug users and 'freaks'. The novel tells the stories of outcasts, people whose imaginary

maps depict a vastly different Sydney than a tourist brochure. Before exploring McGregor's Sydney, it is valuable to see the city through the eyes of Park and Birmingham. In doing so, we may consider notions of antipodes, the 'criminal' history and supposed 'moral emptiness' of Sydney, and the phenomenon of nostalgia in literature dealing with the city.

Birmingham's novel depicts Sydney sprawling incessantly along the coast in both directions. It also reveals the horrors of the city's history, where the abuse of power and the suffering of the powerless produce contradictory images:

Beneath the shining harbour, amid the towers of global greed and deep inside the bad-drugs madness of the suburban wastelands, lies Sydney's shadow history. Terrifying tsunamis, corpse-robbing morgue staff, killer cops, new-Nazis, power junkies and bumbling SWOS teams electrify this epic tale of a city with a cold vacuum for a moral core. (jacket notes)

Leviathan is a popular-academic work, a historical novel or extended essay that (re)tells the history of Sydney. Birmingham presents the metaphor of Sydney as a juggernaut with an uncontrollable and unpredictable self-perpetuating life-force, comparing it to the mythical serpent of the sea. This image references Sydney's geographic origins as a harbour city, which continues to move upwards and out, consuming and changing the landscape as it grows. Birmingham quotes A.D Hope's 'Australia' (1955), brilliantly capturing the distaste and awe apparent in Birmingham's portrait of Sydney:

And her five cities, like five teeming sores
Each drains her; a vast parasite robber state
Where secondhand Europeans pullulate
Timidly on the edge of alien shores. (119)

Birmingham's book is concerned not only with telling the story of this city of migrants (he says, 'Sydney is almost wholly a migrant creation' (13)) and the violence of colonisation, but also the changing and changeable nature of the city:

Thousands of furnaces burned millions of tonnes of wood and coal as the industrial revolution, which had gestated for centuries in Europe, swept Sydney in a few short years, bringing with it the choking smog. The wealth of the continent was there to be stolen, manufacturing and transport, the sinews of a modern industrial state, all grew freakishly in size and complexity as the colonists created their replica of an advanced civilization on the rough foundations of Arthur Phillip's convict settlement. (198)

Like *chemical palace*, Birmingham's book is not really concerned with the ways in which the city is presented on the world-stage, or with the myths and grand-narratives that have been attached to it by governments and councils and presented through media and government propaganda (except perhaps in aid of breaking them down). Both texts are, rather, mostly concerned with the polyphonic, often contradictory, unromantic stories that make up the 'real' history of the city. Birmingham is interested in revealing the hypocrisies, injustices and short-falls of the social contract that Hobbes placed so much faith in. His book, like *chemical place*, is built upon individual stories, very *human* tales that demonstrate broader social trends and themes, giving voice to the powerless. Yet, unlike *chemical palace*, *Leviathan* is a depressing book with very little to say about the positive aspects of Sydney that McGregor and Park convey.

Extracts such as the following are characteristic of the book's dark view of the city's history:

At the start of Askin's administration Sydney was a city of easy virtue, crisscrossed by diffuse and *relatively* insubstantial currents of criminal enterprise which thrived on

public tolerance and an absence of civic mores. Ten years later it was a city subverted, its politics enfeebled by the rise of a criminal counterstate. (Birmingham 476-477)

And later:

There was no honour, it seems, amongst thieves or bent cops. The real victims in all this of course were the likes of that fourteen year-old girl who sat next to me on the steps outside of Woolworths in Kings Cross, or the emaciated Aboriginal boy who needed us to stick the syringe into his arms, or the sad, stiffening transsexual on the slab at the Glebe Morgue. (488)

While *Leviathan* is entertaining and informative, emotive images like the above do not present a deep or balanced view of Sydney's 'underbelly'. Whilst touching on aspects of the city that *chemical palace* is more consistently concerned with, Birmingham reverts to using prostitutes and 'junkies' as archetypes of pathos, thus dehumanising them. To be fair, Birmingham himself admits in the book's closing chapter, 'So Much for the Afterglow', that:

Not only had the chapter on Sydney's women disappeared, the women themselves, apart from a few cameos, had gone MIA. And the gays? The burbs? The celebration? The good vibes of living in the greatest city in the world? Forget it. Sometime back in 1995 I wandered off the bright, teeming thoroughfares and down into a very dark alley. I never came back. (506)

Leviathan invokes the dark underbelly of Sydney with an unparalleled vividness, but there is a certain xenophobic distance in his writing. When he writes of queers, drug addicts and the poor, it is with the usual well-meaning sympathy, pathos and subtle distaste applied by those who lack personal experience with these communities. His images of Sydney's slums lack the humour and 'heart' that characterise more well-rounded representations of Sydney's under-classes. What makes McGregor's novel distinctive and significant in the context of Australian literature is that it is written largely from *inside* the dark alley that Birmingham finds so pitiful, but it expresses the lighter aspects of life within and around the dirty, dangerous, and *beautiful* city. In *chemical palace*, McGregor conjures a Sydney that it is both cruel and wonderful; a significantly less sensationalised and more complex animal than that which Birmingham's *Leviathan* presents.

Psychogeography and Ruth Park's Sydney

Another Australian author whose body of work suggests something of an obsession with Sydney is Ruth Park. Park's work is well-respected and popular with Australian readers. Her novels about an Irish-Australian family living in the slums of Surry Hills, *Harp in the South* (1948) and *Poor Man's Orange* (1949), have been made into successful films (1986; 1987). Park's writing on Sydney is nationally influential because of its balanced, if somewhat nostalgic, portrayal of the city. I do not claim Park's portrayal is correct, just that it demonstrates a balance of positive and negative components, of hope and hopelessness, etc. This is demonstrated in her *Companion Guide to Sydney* (Sydney: Collins, 1973), in which she speaks fondly about the dirty, alcohol-fuelled inner-city hotels (33). The intimacy of Park's *Companion Guide* is achieved through employing a narrative technique that recalls 'psychogeography'. 'Psychogeography' is a term associated with Guy Debord and the Situationists, which refers to the practice of taking a certain approach to urban environments. Debord (1955) and his contemporaries expressed a desire to become 'psychogeographers', with an understanding of the 'precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviors of individuals' (Debord 23). Psychogeography encouraged an awareness of the ways in which physical environments effect and control people's movements in everyday spaces, and the ways in

which landscapes (in particular, urban landscapes) impact the experiences, emotions and actions of people and society. The psychogeographers were also interested in exposing and subverting what they considered to be conscious manipulation of people and society through geography, landscape and architecture (Debord 25). Whilst Park is not likely to have been associated with this theory, her methods in the *Companion Guide* demonstrate sensitivity to what Debord calls:

The sudden change of ambiance in a street within the space of a few meters; the evident division of a city into zones of distinct psychic atmospheres; the path of least resistance which is automatically followed in aimless strolls (and which has no relation to the physical contour of the ground); the appealing or repelling character of certain places... (25)

The *Companion Guide* takes readers on a virtual walk through the city, focussing on the harbour-surrounds and the metropolitan areas, which are constructed as the heart and arterial centre of the metropolis. As with a psychogeographic mapping, Park's book discusses the ways in which the built environments entice and repel the walker, as well as the atmosphere, and feelings fashioned by specific environmental features. Her attention to both the subjective and objective qualities of the built environment makes Park's analysis psychogeographic. Her focus is also distinctly historical, but in this approach she treads a line between fact and impression, objectivity and subjectivity, and her history of Sydney's inner-city is like a re-enactment or re-imagining, rather than a re-telling of facts.

The *Companion Guide* opens with '[h]ere we stand then', inviting the reader to come, at least imaginatively, on the journey with the author (9). The journey Park invites us on begins at Circular Quay, which we soon discover is far more than a glittering tourist attraction. Park reminds us that beneath the harbour cafes and buskers lies the point of origin for the bustling metropolis itself – Sydney was *born* here. Like Birmingham, Park reminds us that 'Sydney is built on a landscape littered with human bones' (9). This eerie image acknowledges the invasion of Australia and subsequent massacres of Indigenous peoples in the process of settlement. As she leads us through the built environments, cluttered with history and stories, Park takes care to make her readers aware of the natural environment into which the foundations for the huge and sprawling city were laid:

Only the sandstone bones of the land remain. The hills have become slighter in grade, the gullies filled, the sea driven back, a forest of steel and concrete cacti has sprung from the rind of the earth. (15)

Park's perspective shifts from 'ant-level' to a bird's eye view of the city; a technique also employed in McGregor's writing, where sudden shifts in perspective – from intimate to universal – are used to a similar effect. This shift unsettles the image, prompting the reader to reconsider the powerful force of landscape in altering mood and emotion, and the profound consequences of human-made change. The use of the agent-less passive construction gives the reader the sense that change is inevitable, unstoppable and continuous, and helps to place the author on the same level as the reader – in the position of a lowly citizen of the city. The citizen is at once a witness to the city's transformations and part of the ever-shifting whole. As we will see, this theme also features powerfully in *chemical palace*. Like that of the psychogeographers, Park's writing demonstrates a compelling sense of perspective. She suggests that visitors to the city should:

See Sydney first from ant-level and then, when you know a great deal about the city it will be safe for you to rise in that ear-popping A.M.P. lift to see an impressive but appalling view. ... It is the big new buildings standing on Sydney's old-world ground plan of disorderly narrow streets that cause the trouble. (16)

Her description is unapologetically subjective as she explains that when viewed from afar the city looks sorrowful; a fact attributed mainly to the alienating and impersonal concrete-driven architecture of the 1980s, and its uncomfortable fit with the early colonial street-design. Just as the psychogeographers, Park suggests that tourists should abandon the on-high view of the city and opt for a kind of *urban wandering* that is guided by historical interests and human stories. Like all of Park's writing, this work exhibits a dedicated focus on the city's lower-classes – the poor neighbourhoods and slums – and that is perhaps why Park, like McGregor, sees an important history in the pubs and social spaces of everyday working class suburbs (23).

Park's focus on the lower-classes translates into a distrust and dislike of gentrification. She bemoans the violent development threatening Glebe (in the 1970s), a community of university students and artists, where the planned freeway developments are proposed to 'displace at least 6000 people over the next decade' (387). Her description of Glebe's inhabitants as 'pensioners and migrant artisans in decrepit cottages and rundown Edwardian mansions' communicates her affection for the eccentric inner-city suburb (378). Towards the end of her book, Park's journey brings her to King's Cross – close to Sydney's Oxford Street, and part of the queer/freak ghetto in the 1990s. She invokes the geographic scene with poetic humour:

Though no longer 'Sydney's entertainment centre' – during the R. and R. boom from 1967 it was 'south-east Asia's entertainment centre' – it is a weird, electric place by night, exorbitant, often as bent as a bicycle wheel, offering venal and dubious pleasures as well as four-cornered ones. (399)

While exposing the 'grossness' of King's Cross, with its neon façade and 'dodgy' dealings, Park implores the traveller to give it a chance, saying that: 'It knows what it is and pretends to nothing.' (399) She also explains that 'King's Cross is truly a villiage, one of the several sewn indistinguishably edge to edge in the municipal of Fitzroy' (399). The psychogeographic method allows Park to explore the city's 'bent' enclaves with affection and sophistication. Evidently inspired by Park's writing, McGregor's novel also displays an interest in the intimacy of a psychogeographic literary method, and in the history of people and places. McGregor's characters, with their anarchistic ideals and radical use of space, are acutely aware of the restrictions and segregations built into the city around them, but they resist them in various creative ways. Outside of the dance party there are still psychogeographic strategies at play, as demonstrated by the moments in McGregor's novel where characters break out of the urban environment and subvert its (un)natural uses. Additionally, *chemical palace* depicts the ways in which Sydney's psychogeography affects people regardless of their protests, shaping the lived experience of all who inhabit its spaces, albeit in different ways.

Sydney: sin city

Park, Birmingham and McGregor all invoke Sydney's 'criminal history' and her long association with bacchanalia:

'There were Cheap John shops and shoemakers' hovels and no end of publick houses. Here might always be seen the British tar and the foreign tar, as incontinently drunk as these noble mariners could desire to be. This is the land of fiddlers and brazen huzzies, of more rum and eternal spree, dancing and singing and brawling and curses and coarse revelry.' (Quoted in Park 33)

Sydney, Australia's oldest urban settlement has long been associated with a wild energy, an irrepressible character and deviance, as captured in Park's and Birmingham's texts. From its violent convict origins, to the tensions between its many different ethnic and social groups,

Sydney has (rightly or wrongly) been seen as a city of danger and chaos. Felicity Collins (2006) quotes author Mark Twain (1895), who proclaimed: 'God made the harbour and that's alright; but Satan made Sydney' (para. 4.) Collins describes Sydney's lifestyle as 'an orgy of dancing, singing and hair-combing' driven by a 'form of sacramental or anti-platonic hedonism' (para. 28.). Birmingham and Park make much of the early idea of Sydney as the antipodes to civilisation in their books. Birmingham suggests that the city's moral core is empty and that Hobbes' 'state of nature' rules, taking form in struggles for wealth and power: Here perhaps, we can find the genesis of the city's fall; that ceaseless, shifting dissonance within Sydney's history, that will to power in a place without history, long-lived institutions or a moral centre. There is something so familiar in the way the likes of George Freeman and Lennie McPherson consolidated their hold over the city in the 1960s. Something so ordinary in the ferment of violence and ruthlessness directed towards establishing their monopolistic power. John Macarthur would have understood. (490)

Birmingham utilises subjective characterisations of historical figures to make his scenes more authentic, and this use of characterisation and subjectivity shifts the historical perspective back down to the 'ant-level' of individual human stories: 'But in the end, of course, understanding counts for little when measured against consequence and the sorrows of the dead' (Birmingham 490).

An unremitting process of modification characterises this city built on the bones of convicts, Aboriginal Australians and other unlucky souls who were losers in the battle for power and survival. Modern governments have tried to strip the city of its dark history, and lay to rest her association with danger and chaos, through gentrification, modernisation and (re)construction. These processes have erased, or at least sanitised, the shadowy record of a city of convicts, criminals and outcasts. Through a kind of cosmetic surgery (particularly in the 1980s) the inner-city has been increasingly civilised and sterilised for the international eye. The built environment has been metamorphosed in attempts to eradicate the past, with that which is decrepit and run-down being demolished. The gentrification of urban residential environments has had the effect of driving out undesirable human elements associated with urban decay. McGregor's novel achieves a kind of mapping of the movements of these undesirable human elements by telling the stories of her outcast characters, particularly Holmes, traffic and Slip, as they struggle to find a place in inner-city Sydney where their queer communities can congregate. McGregor's novel offers an inverted perspective on this trend: it yearns for the dirty and chaotic Sydney of the past and desires to stop the process of cultural gentrification that threatens many non-consumer and anarchic forms of cultural expression. The novel's reference to Dionysius (a quote from Park in the epigraph) establishes McGregor's connection with the idea of a sin city immediately, and the novel goes on to promote the inner-city as a playground of chaos, joy, danger and fun. The construction of queer sex, dance and drug cultures as deviant was inextricably related to the spread of HIV in 1980s and early 1990s. To some conservatives, such as Fred Nile, it seemed that all of a sudden the unnatural 'freaks' were being punished for their sins. The mainstream press often blamed gay men and injecting drug users for the disease and discrimination against HIV positive people was rife. Fred Nile famously called for all gay men to be quarantined in 1983¹⁶. The characters of *chemical palace* are all touched by HIV and/or Hepatitis, directly or indirectly, and this influences the culture they create. The performances, outfits and themes of

¹⁶ Source: 'Pride History Group Timeline'.

URL: <http://pridehistorygroup.org.au/history/activism/1980.html>

the parties that drive the narrative of the novel express a culture unique to this time, in which some of those closest to the disease found a collective strength in embracing their deviant status. With the spread of HIV, the idea of Sydney as a sin city took on a new and more urgent meaning. However, the idea of a sin city does not always carry negative, or even criminal connotations. For McGregor, and other radical writers and performers, this is what makes the city of Sydney remarkable and joyful; the sense of fun and excitement inextricably linked with noise and chaos; the winding streets and endless social spaces filled with every opportunity for mischief and merriment.

Fiona McGregor's Sydney

Quoted in one of two epigraphs at the opening of *chemical palace*, Park's writing on Sydney has certainly influenced McGregor's conception of the place. Few writers treat this wonderful and treacherous city with such affection as Park, but McGregor is one such writer. McGregor's second publication, the collection of short stories, *Suck My Toes*, presents the city of Sydney from the diverse perspectives of adults and children, gays and straights, and young and old characters. The collection contains stories of multiple characters that are tenuously linked. Characters from one story re-emerge in later stories, or turn out to be the sibling of a previous character, and so on. In the same vein as *chemical palace*, it can be argued that the city is the main character in *Suck My Toes*, as it is the one constant, the nexus around which the action revolves. *Suck My Toes* begins with 'Dirt', a tale that presents a child's first experience of profound fear. The narrative also communicates a child's relationship to the natural environment around Sydney, particularly coastal areas. The story has a decidedly autobiographical feel and describes locations in Sydney that are personally important to McGregor. Her writing about place is always concerned with the process of locating oneself and one's identity in accordance with the lived experience of familiar landscapes. Throughout the story there's an intimate awareness of the sensual relationship between the self and the surrounding environment, revealed by references to the way in which familiar smells and sensations of nature interact with the body and senses.

'Dirt' introduces two children who will eventually resurface as adult characters in stories later in the collection. It describes an afternoon of play in bushland around the harbour where two young friends have gone to light a fire and cook apples to eat. Beginning in a happy and naïve frame, the story turns sinister when a strange man chases the girls in an attempt to satisfy some perverted sexual desire. The narrative's sophistication is in McGregor's portrait of the environment, where pleasant and fearful aspects are revealed in equal parts. From the outset we are introduced to the scene from a child's naïve and imaginative viewpoint, where the plants are described like human figures:

The trees are all twisted. This one has an elbow, that one's poking a finger in its stomach. They look like people who've got something to say but they don't know how to say it. The way the bark rumples in places makes Jane think of Granny's ankles spilling over her shoe strap. Knobs weep a sap which hardens to dark toffee. The trees are called angophoras. Jane loves that ssshhh sound they make when the wind goes through them, and how they smell. Eucalyptus. And the smell of the dirt after the rain, rising up around her, steamy and coarse. (1)

The language here is a tantalising mixture of simplicity and sensuousness; childlike grammatically-simple sentences and imaginative, playful images give way to ripe and sensual natural images. This is a place where the pre-pubescent girls feel safe; it is their 'turf':

The bush is her wilderness; if she sticks to the right tracks she can walk non-stop for almost two hours and never see people or come to a road. It's full of the whistles, screeches and caws of birds. (4)

This sense of ownership over places is strong throughout McGregor's work, taking on a particularly interesting and psychogeographic feel later, when she turns her pen to urban sites. It is precisely because the narrative communicates this sense of ownership, familiarity and the feeling of safety that, as readers, we are so moved when the bush becomes dangerous to girls as they are pursued by the man who wishes to harm them. McGregor builds up to this point using a clever change in the characters' observations of the environment as they move through different and more isolated parts of the bushland: 'The trees here are scrawny and sick-looking with a disease called dieback. It is an open, sunlit and sad place' (5). As the environment grows more sinister, a sickly atmosphere descends and the girls are approached and pursued by the strange and threatening man who asks them sexually inappropriate questions. As they run to escape him, the girls are whipped by plants and scratched by stones. The bush they love so much has instantly become a hostile environment as they lose their childhood bravado and innocence, realising their own vulnerability for the first time. Pleasant and unpleasant images of the surrounding environment are recalled alongside one another; sun hitting houses across the bay makes them look like Turkish delight at the same time that the bush throws up all sorts of obstacles. The statement that the breeze makes 'Jane's sweat go cold' warns of the approaching danger:

A wind whooshes through the trees and blows dirt into her eyes and the bush feels unfriendly all of a sudden. Then there's a crunching and the man's back, walking like he's in a hurry. (10)

The action is then structured around a mapping of the headlands as the girls struggle to evade their attacker. It is a profound and unjust event for the children to experience.

Suck My Toes progresses from this childish view of familiar and beloved landscape and surrounds that are complicated by the attack on the girls' innocence, to exploring various adult experiences of place. The story 'Growth', told from the characters' now adult perspective, reconnects with this era of childhood, demonstrating the role of landscape and place in memory and the positioning of the self:

Teresa walked the upper side of the split-level street, picking cat hairs off her arms. The harbour bridge glowed behind her, the light at its apex winking like a red eye. She reached the corner where a twelve-year-old Sally had carved her initials in the wet cement. The initials were there still. (74)

There is an unmistakable nostalgia for places in the short stories of *Suck My Toes*, which survey the significance of inscribing oneself on the landscape as a child, as well as the familiarity and sense of ownership that we have over locations in our adult years. The adult understanding intensifies the way in which environments are evoked in McGregor's descriptions:

The garden dropped steeply, down the embankment. The water was streets below but the clinking of halyards on masts rose clearly through the air. The view of blackness, a cloudy sky touching somewhere the ocean and the headland opposite. Alone on the headland was the naval depot, underlined by spotlights. The striped water hung below it like a heavy curtain, ruffled in the breeze. (55)

An obvious difference in the adult descriptions is evident in the increased understanding of the world as driven by seasonal changes and patterns, including patterns of life and death. McGregor's mature characters have a particularly keen sense of their environments as they age, decay and change – both their natural and man-made environments:

Marion looked away from her parents, through the glass doors. She wanted to be on the other side, in the darkness, surrounded by the harbour. She imagined the ruffled silken touch of the warm air that came off the water at this time of year. But the plate glass was coated: you couldn't see in from the outside, and from the inside the most dominant image was your own reflection. The three of them sitting around the dining-room table. Silent. Eating. (23)

The obvious tension in this image is between the natural environment of the harbour representing life or 'aliveness', and the protective cocoon of Marion's parents' house; a deadened environment secluded from the outside.

Many of the stories in *Suck My Toes* introduce a theme that will later feature heavily in *chemical palace*: the position of memory in places and locations, streetscapes and objects. The following intimates McGregor's view that places can regulate interactions and behaviour:

She decided not to say anything in order to deviate the conversation, so far an exact replica of the one the three of them had had the dawn they ran into each other at the Taxi Club. It was disconcerting for Teresa to see people from her childhood resurface at Taylor Square with the sun. Crossing the harbour was not a long enough journey. (58)

The glittering nightlife culture of Taylor Square determines the character of conversations between the two old friends, who barely know each other after years apart. Teresa feels her world is too small because her attempts to escape her childhood are thwarted by the power of Oxford Street to siphon disparate queers into one locality. Later in the collection, the landscape is seen to hold back the personal growth of one of McGregor's characters:

Joel passed the yacht club. He had been a bit of a coward really, to have kept it a secret this long; surely he had underestimated his father. But when Joel fitted the rectangular key into the iron gate, he knew he had undergone the metamorphosis he underwent each time he crossed the park, and that certain features had already been erased. He imagined an invisible gateway spanning Rushcutter's Bay, himself passing through it into a zone lit by childhood and other people's desires. (80)

Joel's 'coming out' is sidelined again and his double-life continues. Joel is an active part of the gay community in one facet of his life, but also married to a childhood idea of himself in Rushcutters Bay, where he grew up. McGregor's metaphor of an 'invisible gateway' succinctly expresses the relationship between environment and behaviour, which limits as much as it liberates. Also important to McGregor's mapping of places and nostalgia is the idea of associations:

There are certain associations which will always be there. Certain places, people and things with many other facets, but this is always the first facet that shows itself. That street off South Dowling because a particularly good dealer once lived there... (90-1)

What has begun as a process of looking at the effects of landscape on behaviour and mood becomes the more complex task of seeing alternative geographies. In this case, a drug addict's mapping of the city. For a drug addict the city may look different, different places may be significant and places that may be unappealing to many are more appealing to an individual whose aims are determined by their habit. In this we observe Halberstam's notion of queer time (10) interacting with a 'queer psychogeography'.

Even for drug addicts, whose mapping of the city is shaped in part by their substance use, some features of the natural environment create a sense of continuity in the city; an indestructible force of slow-moving natural change taking place below the ground and beneath the surface:

Jane turns the corner into the wide lane, strewn with garbage and large stiff guava leaves. Overhead, fruit bats squeak down to the fig trees in Rushcutter's Bay Park. One by one, the old sagging fences are being replaced with new ones of brushwood or fresh-smelling pine. Jane comes to a battered door and puts on a smile. (95)

The junky and her attempt to score are just one small moment which essentially has no effect on the landscape. The tension between this indelible continuity and fleeting transformations of the city of Sydney is developed fully in *chemical palace*, becoming arguably the novel's most enduring statement. The final story, 'Move', expresses McGregor's ambiguous and complex love of the city. 'Christine' has relocated from Sydney to Melbourne to take a break from living life 'in the fast lane'. When suggested she come back to spend time with a friend who is dying from AIDS she refuses, saying:

The mere thought of going to Sydney makes me feel panicky and loose, as though I've run half the marathon. I'm exhausted but the other half still looms. (207)

She describes the city with a telling mixture of excitement and apprehension, like a reformed junky talking about the temptation of one last hit:

Hard yellow sunlight in car bonnets, the fug of exhaust, screaming traffic. It takes twenty minutes to get from Parramatta Road to Broadway. A sense of that luminous space behind the CBD, patches of blue, the sweep of ocean. A swim after work and then out to dinner and then somewhere else. Oh, it's tempting, I'm tempted. (207)

This depiction is sensual, almost palpable; it makes the reader's heart race. McGregor's images encapsulate the movement and exhilaration that characterises Sydney, but also the confusion and infinity of the city's landscapes. For the first time we are introduced to McGregor's profound ambivalence towards Sydney – the love and fear.

Vicious bitch-goddess: The Sydney of chemical palace

A gay friend of mine once described the city of Sydney as 'a vicious bitch Goddess, who'll suck you dry', and this is a common concept on the gay scene. Constructed as wonderful and cruel, Sydney is the essence of *chemical palace*. In most reviews of the novel, the city of Sydney is not mentioned at all, its symbolic role perhaps ephemeral and unclear compared with more the visceral themes of disease and drug use. However, when one looks at McGregor's previous work, essays, articles and interviews, it is clear that Sydney has been a crucial theme in most, if not all of her writing ('Mutant' 228). Both the ardent and committed way in which the author describes Sydney, as well as the regularity and continuity of images of the city, make it a notable and profound thread in *chemical palace* – the thread that ultimately holds the narrative together. McGregor says:

What remains consistent in my work and, I hope, grows stronger, is spirit of place. I can't imagine writing about much besides Sydney ever again. This ravaged, ravishing, mercurial city is my real main character. Sydney is the essence I am always trying to capture. And the fear and shame are there again, of not measuring up to my material. But the desire to embrace and overcome them is stronger. ('Mutant' 228)

How then can we consider McGregor's evocations of place throughout *chemical palace*? What do we make of the way in which she has constructed and re-imagined the city, in particular the areas of Surry Hills, Darlinghurst, King's Cross and Paddington? McGregor's descriptions of place communicate: senses of belonging; problems of community and the ghetto; and the question of home. These are developed through her lyrical psychogeographic mapping of the city, and the unique images and tracings of Sydney presented in the novel construct an alternative history – the history of radical queer Sydney.

To understand the profundity of McGregor's ambivalent relationship to the city, we can look to the gay scene and its history, and the various histories of crime and drugs in the inner-city. Birmingham's *Leviathan* reveals a connection between Sydney's infamous criminal background and the underground queer scene that will later gain notoriety:

Sydney the penal colony was a place created in the male image, a military world of violence and control where everyone bent to the demands of the system. A system run by men for men, with women included as a sexual afterthought. Georgian and Victorian society had a horror of homosexuality, made all the more compelling by its ubiquitousness. (79)

This ever-present threat of homosexuality would eventually mature into a city later known for its strong gay community and wild celebrations in the form of the Mardi Gras, but a long history of repression, homophobia and resistance would precede. One of McGregor's more mature characters, Turkish Jim, recalls his younger days in Sydney:

I was a small-town boy from Palmerston North, New Zealand, and Bondi seemed the epitome of Sydney when I first moved here. I lived for a while in a house by the water. Oh, we had wild parties there in the 70s. People fell in love and fell off cliffs, New York Dolls on the stereo. ... Later I moved to a warehouse space near the corner of Crown and Oxford. This was before the Boulevard was built and the first thing I saw when I woke up was the Opera House and Harbour Bridge between my toes. When the warehouse was redeveloped I moved up the road to Little Oxford Street just near that fuck club the Professor loved so much. (108)

The juxtaposition of 'falling in love' and 'falling off cliffs' impeccably articulates the ambiguous construction of the city that dominates *chemical palace*. The essential value of McGregor's picture of Sydney's queer subcultures lies in its complexity and its ambivalence. Her constructions of Sydney expound the city's best, and its very worst. The human stories that compose McGregor's conception of the city and its histories are assembled layer upon layer in her depictions of the built environment. At every turn the city-scape bares the markers of its human history as if Sydney is the page upon which all human narratives are written, overlapping and cacophonous.

The city's physical environments embody this ambivalence in their schizophrenic layering of the new upon the old. Close to the beginning, the novel addresses the reader directly saying: 'Turn off Oxford St head away from the harbour, bus station, police station then the maze of laneways' (3). The imperative pulls the reader right into the scene, making subsequent descriptions more vivid and tangible. What follows are adjectives such as 'narrow', 'corroded' and 'increasingly worn', introducing the notions of decay and change, which recur throughout the novel. McGregor constructs for the reader a city in the process of a constant, intensive development and upheaval, which is physical and social. In these early pages we are told that '[t]he area was changing. From the roof unpeeled a skyline sprouting cranes in every direction. Demolition reconstruction, a city centuries old not yet built' (3). McGregor's initial images of Sydney in *chemical palace* resonate with Birmingham's historical references to the inner-city, particularly the district of Redfern:

In Redfern he found that curious arrangement, so common in Sydney, of all the classes being thrown in together; tall, spacious terraces along Pitt and Cleveland Streets surrounded with native fig trees of Norfolk pines, wretched hovels lining Botany Road, log huts everywhere in between, and an entirely new suburb rising on the black sandy hills of Sir Daniel Cooper's Waterloo Estate to the south. This, he said, was something you could only see in the New World, the sudden appearance of a whole town, the boards of its houses still raw with sap and sharp splinters. Nowhere but Australia,

however, could you find such a collection of ‘hastily erected frail small habitations, devoid of even a pretence to ornament and in many or most cases belonging to, and built by those who inhabit them’. (205)

Birmingham’s description of colonial Redfern encapsulates the same energy and awe for the prolific growth and changeability of the urban environment. However, it lacks the affection with which McGregor always presents this shifting chaos. Both McGregor and Birmingham demonstrate a degree of sensitivity to atmosphere and the way in which the city embodies its history. This feature is also common between these texts and Park’s. What separates McGregor’s Sydney and Birmingham’s Sydney is the tacit judgement evident in their descriptions of the city’s ‘colourful’ places: where Birmingham draws a picture of neglect, exploitation and abuse flourishing in the gloomy hovels of the metropolis, McGregor sees the same ghettos and urban ‘dives’ as the life-blood of the city; a haven for creativity, energetic artistic innovation and radical political articulation.

Despite the partial-gentrification of what were originally slums in Darlinghurst, Redfern and Surry Hills, poor communities still live in and fight for a place in Redfern and the inner-city. In Redfern, this fight is represented in Sydney’s iconic Aboriginal precinct, ‘The Block’. The Block is an Indigenous residential zone that occupies part of central Redfern, around Eveleigh Street. Similarly, in Surry Hills and Darlinghurst one can still observe run-down boarding houses and ramshackle old terraces, which are subdivided and home to many poor young queers, drug users and drug dealers. The police fight a constant battle to try and remove these elements, conducting raids on the boarding houses in Darlinghurst, from which some dealers still operate, servicing the gay club clientele of Oxford Street. The police, of course, end up being employed in the service of the ‘respectable’ tenants, protecting private property and supporting the gentrification process in these high-value real estate areas by oppressing the activities of undesirable residents. Eve Vincent’s 2006 essay, ‘Tour of Beauty’ (*Meanjin* 65.2; 2006) offers keen observation of the ever-present social divide that causes tension in Redfern. A largely Aboriginal district since the Depression, during which many Indigenous people worked as feters at the Eveleigh rail yard, Redfern and Waterloo experienced a further influx of Aboriginal people in the 1960s and 1970s as they left rural reserves to seek opportunities in the city (Vincent 124). The neighbourhood has always struggled with poverty and social problems, but has also seen many hard working champions whose tireless efforts in community building and improvement have enjoyed real success. While I would never romanticise the Redfern/Waterloo precinct, it is undeniable that for many of its inhabitants, who have been displaced multiple times – from their homelands, to missions and reserves, and from reserves to the slums of the inner-city – Redfern is home; and many say that it is the one place they know where ‘people say hello to each other’ (Vincent 126). However, as the city of Sydney has grown and the Central Business District has modernised, Governments have turned their attention to Redfern and Waterloo as prime real estate. An Act passed in 2004 by the NSW Government created the Redfern-Waterloo Authority (RWA), excising the area from the jurisdiction of Sydney City Council. This meant that the ordinary heritage protection laws would no longer apply to The Block and many surrounding sites, and that the then Minister for Redfern-Waterloo, Frank Sartor, could compulsorily acquire land, ‘without room for objection’ (Vincent 122). Vincent explains that a composite community with complex needs, an eminent history and legitimate claims to the area was in danger of being hastily dissolved to make way for a spreading corporate population:

Documents leaked to the *Sydney Morning Herald* in November 2004 outlined the planned privatisation of \$540 million worth of public assets over ten years in order to facilitate the CBD’s expansion and double the area’s residential population. They

detailed extensive redevelopment of the Department of Housing's 23.4 hectare Redfern-Waterloo estate as part of a deliberate plan to change the social mix of an area in which many of the current residents are poor, old and on a disability support pension. (122)

While appealing to a rhetoric of wanting to create social change and improve conditions in the precinct, the RWA has been criticised for failing to consult with Indigenous groups (122) and waging a kind of war against the Aboriginal Housing Company (AHC), which owns the block and wishes to redevelop it as a healthy and thriving community (123). While there are patent distinctions in the experience of gentrification in queer precincts and Indigenous communities in Sydney, the general process has been the same: Governments and councils find it hard to resist the lure of Sydney's inner-city real estate resources. The poor are an inconvenience tying up the potentially profitable dwindling reserves of underdeveloped land in a choking city. McGregor's *chemical palace* is set across a time-frame that straddles the ending of an era where vibrant bustling slum communities (with their share of problems) were largely neglected, and a new era of unstoppable development.

The suburbs of Redfern and Darlington are located adjacent to Sydney University, and student politics, left-leaning art, and radical socialism have also flourished in these areas. The radical youth communities associated with the university have long been supporters of Aboriginal rights in Redfern. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, as chronicled in *chemical palace*, both communities have been displaced as rents rose sharply, making Newtown, Darlington and even Redfern quite expensive places to live. In the 1990s the inner-city of Sydney is in a state of flux; everywhere the process of gentrification is 'upgrading' communities, and the poor are moving further out of the city – to Marrickville, Dulwich Hill and Ashfield, for example. McGregor's characters infect this changing urban environment like a virus fighting to survive in a medicated body. While the governments clean up the city for an increasing tourist market and events such as the 1988 Bicentenary and the 2000 Olympics, the poorer communities struggle to survive and maintain their lifestyles. While city architecture becomes increasingly biased towards business and high-end residential, the poorer, marginal and disparate communities are 'pushed out' of the city. For McGregor's characters their inner-city home, represented in the novel by the warehouse, is not just a place of residence, it is a way of life. The warehouse space allows a communal family structure, like a tribe, where costs and possessions are shared. The warehouse is close to the places where they play, and these places are often even more important to the characters' sense of belonging than where they sleep at night. The gentrification of Oxford Street and Darlinghurst brings expensive new shops, bidding for a share of the slowly increasing wealth of Sydney's upper-class gays. The community, at least according to McGregor, is becoming increasingly alien and alienating to radical queer subculture and its participants.

In extracts such as the following, *chemical palace* communicates the characters' sense they are being 'pushed out' of areas where they once felt at home:

Few remembered Slut City either so Billy began to feel her experience stood for nothing. A basement on Williams Street no longer operable since a bust by licensing cops the night they stayed open half an hour too long, a new venue in the city doing retro nights only, another in the Cross only available for regular club nights organised by select and established promoters. Another who said yes then no then yes then no again. So they came back to Oxford Street knowing at least that most of their crowd was likely to be near the area. Treading the grimy stairs up and down to every venue

they often wondered if it wouldn't be easier finding a warehouse and setting up their own BYO bar. (35)

In this extract, phrases like '[t]reading the grimy stairs' not only evoke an intimate sense of the atmosphere of places and venues, but take the reader along with the characters on their journey through the changing city, etching out a psychogeographic map when juxtaposed with the lists of suburb and street names. The use of a psychogeographic mapping in her writing, allows McGregor to put a human face to those marginalised by the gentrification process. In *Leviathan*, Birmingham is also keenly aware of the sweeping shifts in Sydney's social landscapes and the remaining, neglected human elements that the city would rather forget. He describes the transformations and the paradoxical divide between progress and poverty with a similar nostalgia, but with significantly more pathos than McGregor. This is not more evident than when we compare his writing on the drug-taking community with McGregor's.

Birmingham declares:

Faces come and go all the time up the Cross. After I had lived in Darlinghurst for a couple of years I realised there were some stayers, perennial hookers and doormen and local crims who never seemed to leave or change or even breathe in some cases. But they were all old hands who had cut some sort of Faustian deal to survive on the edge of the abyss. The younger faces almost never lasted. They just disappeared or grew so old so fast it was like watching a special effects movie. In that way heroin was almost occult in its power, a magic dust which could suck the life right out of your face. (403)

The drugs of choice in *chemical palace* may be different (mostly speed, ecstasy and crystal methamphetamine – all 'uppers'), but the message is the same; the city can be like a dangerous roller-coaster catching the young and unwary in a down-ward spiral, which may hold them for a long period of time. McGregor's novel faces the issue of descent into drug abuse through traffic's and Holmes' narratives, as well as those of Jimi and other minor characters. It is interesting to think about where the line may be drawn between the characters of *chemical palace* and the kind of 'living dead' described here by Birmingham. In a later part of McGregor's novel we encounter similar images, as traffic goes through her darkest period of drug-dependence. McGregor's representation of the inner-city communities (and the experience of drug abuse) is, however, much more sophisticated and even-handed. She does not revert to simplistic images or tragic symbolism when presenting characters with drug problems, and she writes equally of their exultant periods, resisting the temptation to use dramatic images of faceless haggard victims, and sensational references to actual drug use. In fact, McGregor represents drug use in an almost blasé manner, whereas Birmingham's descriptions rely on a certain level of melodrama and catastrophe, as well a perspective that is distinctly 'outside' this community, looking in with pity.

An excellent achievement of McGregor's novel is in the way it evokes these complex images of inner-city communities so intimately, while also maintaining a sense of balance and calm perspective. However, the area in which the novel contributes the most to Australian literature and history is in its positive and constructive representation of radical party communities and their associated drug culture. These communities are so often represented through sensationalised tales of stupidity, moral emptiness and castigation, such as in the film *Go! Life Begins at 3am* (Doug Liman; 1999), where characters are threatened with guns, hit by cars, chased by 'bad guys' and involved in random, inexplicable sexual activities. One character even supposedly 'overdoses' on marijuana, which is highly unrealistic. The characters in these films lack personality; they are generally stereotypes, and the action is humorous but impracticable. On the flipside, there are the drug movies that present a desolate and bleak picture, such as *Requiem for a Dream* (Darren Aronofsky; 2000). While critics have

praised the film, audiences did not warm to it: it made far less at the box office than expected (Kipp n. pag). Jeremiah Kipp expresses perfectly what is lacking in Aronofsky's flashy voyeuristic portrayal of the characters' descent into addiction and humiliation:

Some critics are sure to fawn over *Requiem*. It goes further than most films into uncomfortable territory, and the spinning visuals are technically accomplished. I'm sure Darren Aronofsky's courage will be extolled – yes, it's so bold to show human misery without sympathy or understanding. (n. pag.)

Depictions such as this simply reinforce the popular negative stereotypes of drug use and abuse, leading mainstream audiences to support paternalistic 'nanny state' regulations and crack-downs on drug cultures. This moral and social misunderstanding is played out in the streets and landscapes of the city, where those who fear drug users seek to shut them out and banish them from view. The balance and complexity with which the issues of drug use and drug abuse are treated by McGregor is intimately coupled with her treatment of the city's geography. The landscapes are littered with signs of the struggle between the straight and the bent. Her geographies in the novel are uniquely queer, and both drug use and place are responsible for the mapping of life experience onto the characters' mind and memory. Drug abuse is a complex experience, not a harrowing descent into hell. There is humour and banality, and there are friendships and loyalties. The author's presentation of the city is tinged with the subtle bruising of one who has been down a path of habit and ennui, and while McGregor (through Holmes) wonders at one point in the novel why 'the worst [memories are always] the first to resurface' (6), she manages to reach below them, finding pearls of happiness and creativity that inspired her to begin writing the novel many years before.

McGregor's *chemical palace* is driven by the author's passionate need to represent and record the lifestyle and experiences of Sydney's radical queer community in the 1990s. The warehouse lifestyle depicted in *chemical palace* is a fictional version of a way of living in the 1980s and 1990s which the author herself experienced. Trash Vaudeville's description of a share-house he lived in the 1990s reveals a kind of run-down architecture that is disappearing from Sydney's rental market, as properties are renovated and rented at high prices:

i was living in a unique share house in Brumby st Surry Hills, in fact we actually occupied two adjoining ramshackle terraces living as one large household, pulling down the back fence, chipping in to purchase an above ground swimming pool, altering one lounge room into a pseudo sometime disco complete with stage, and the adjoining kitchen into a dressing room, the camp quality of these transformation only emphasised by how tiny these rooms were.

This alternative bohemian life-style, with its emphasis on communality, is intrinsic to the Sydney of *chemical palace*. Like the Situationists, McGregor's characters strive to see the city as something other than a place of work and profit-driven activity, where people are divided into nuclear families and where the residences are designed for 'keeping up with the Joneses'. Warehouse and share-house living facilitate a more collective way of life, allowing people to share financial burdens, food, clothing and even advice in the absence of more traditional family structures. Coupled with the proliferation of public transport and close proximity of houses in the inner-city suburbs, this lifestyle also reduces the environmental impact of individuals. This kind of housing imparts a strong sensation of community and invites the manifestation of unconventional family structures. In *chemical palace*, traffic describes a day in her warehouse home:

She loved the late mornings when everybody was at work. Even with the sounds of industry the warehouse was serene, alternations of direct and pebbled afternoon sunlight widening across the floor, blue cloths rippling in the breeze. An old Chinese

family spent most days on their veranda across the road, next door to them was a brothel. Sometimes if she'd had a shot of speed before work the night before and had smoked and worked her way through comedown at the bar, she would fall into bed exhausted and sleep heavily hanging onto Billy's body until it left her in the morning, then sleep through to the afternoon. Waking to people and activity, missing the solitude. (43)

Here we see the city as traffic sees it in the happy times before she and Billy break up. The Sydney of *chemical palace* is a place where many different kinds of people live in close proximity in relative harmony. The Chinese family on their terrace veranda is reminiscent of the Surry Hills of Park's *Harp in the South*. Characteristically, McGregor describes traffic's experience of her surroundings in a sensual manner – in this case auditory. The sounds of demolition and construction in the ever-changing city ironically provide traffic with a sense of safety and comfort: traffic's love of change and movement is a powerful metaphor in the novel. She is often represented as the truly adventurous 'child of the city', where others crave quiet and stability. This tension remains unresolved in the novel: throughout the narrative, both continuity and transformation are represented in the continuous noise and activity of demolition and construction, and this paradox is subsumed into the complex but coherent symbol of the city as home.

The natural environments around and through the city create an even stronger sense of permanence for the author. A feeling of wonder and affection for the natural environment, weather patterns, and especially the ocean is evident in all of McGregor's previous writing, and natural images are meaningfully developed throughout this novel also. In an early description of Sydney in *chemical palace*, McGregor writes:

The storms! Breaking over the city like collapsing buildings, moving from the horizon faster than you could walk to cover. The buildup all through the night and into day, thick air white-blue sky damp heat, sudden darkness of low cloud. Then rain, release, fat tropical drops crescendoing to deluge. The entire city could be stopped by weather. (8)

This extract encapsulates Sydney's humid and oppressive summer days, which are often broken with fierce exciting storms that rush over the city quite suddenly, dramatically dropping the temperature. McGregor's intimate relationship to weather and the seasons is depicted as a constant in the book, whichever character's perspective the story is being told from at particular points. The above extract exemplifies a particularly Australian image in McGregor's typically rich and sensual manner, and is philosophical in demonstrating the relative powerlessness of people compared with the forces of nature. We see the city – Birmingham's huge seething creature; Park's garden of concrete cacti – 'stopped by weather'. In this way, *chemical palace* communicates universal themes of: man's 'progress'; man against the elements; environmental change and destruction, and; the adaptations of the land to the invasive presence of large quantities of people. This image also demonstrates that the natural environment is a comforting continual in McGregor's writing – it helps to keep the action and events of her characters' lives in philosophical perspective.

The vast numbers of bats that fly across parts of the city in the evening, as if drawn by an eternal force, have captured the imaginations of many who write of Sydney. The bats make an important contribution to McGregor's sense of place, perspective, comfort and grounding in *chemical palace*, and in the *Companion Guide*, Park also describes them:

If in 1790 you had been standing in our present situation, in front of you a dusty red track that was to become George Street, you would have seen an immense flight of

bats, driven by a blasting wind, suddenly filling the sky, settling on fruit and willow trees, thatches and scaffolding... (57)

The bats function as an image of constancy. Bats are blind and follow their instincts, travelling well-worn paths across the sky at dusk to feed. They always do it because that's what they've always done. In *chemical palace*, this image is a comfort to the reader. It can be read as a metaphor for the way in which the young queer people flock to the city for adventure. It reminds us that life goes on as it has for centuries despite the pain and tragedies of the characters. The bats are unchanging certainty, a dark bloom across the sky every evening, following the same path as always, steered by the seasons. McGregor captures the city's mystique and excitement, communicating that Sydney exudes an indescribable force of attraction; a pull that bewitches the characters (and the author), and is both desirable and overwhelming. In *chemical palace* this bewitching quality of Sydney is represented through the life-narratives of Slip and Holmes, whose living and wellbeing are affected by tough experiences and the effects of risky choices. The exhilarating but precarious existence in the city bewitches them and, like the bats, they fly blindly into her tumult. They experience both joy and tragedy, leading them finally to leave the city for a time, for respite and to put their lives back together, before returning stronger and more able to navigate its precarious pathways.

During his time away from Sydney, Holmes stays in a house in the Wollongong area with Slip, the cousin of his deceased boyfriend, from whom he acquired HIV. The following illuminates the enticing pull of city lights, which shine like a beacon in the night as he walks along the beach:

Then along four beaches and home to the wind-cracked house on the hill, setting out too late for the company of filtered sun. So much cloud and rain coming in now there was no division of sea and sky just a dark grey mass pushing the vivid peaks of waves against the beach. Nothing else visible along the brumal headland but the immediate sand and foam till the town lights came on drawing him forward. (49)

Although the lights he is referring to are those of a town south of Sydney, they hint at the magnetic pull of the city on the young and adventurous, who seek alternative life-styles. Both Slip and Holmes stay for some time away from Sydney, healing and resting; Holmes dealing with his own HIV infection and the death of his partner, and Slip dealing with her Hepatitis C and the break up of a long term relationship. Both return to Sydney through the course of the novel, and these home-comings are of vital significance to McGregor's construction of the city. Before returning, Slip also describes the pull of Sydney, and her decision to return:

From the doorway Slip watched it all. Cooking only casually in Sydney, playing enough to make the journey to and from home inconvenient, her doubts about moving back vanished with dessert. She had sun on water then an ink harbour in moonlight, South Australian olive oil with the lingering taste of grass, red wine like velvet, and all the city's finest perverts and party people in the guise of servitude leading the upper echelons in the art of celebration. (164)

This extract delightfully conveys the beauty of the harbour city and its cosmopolitan fare; bursting with delicious references to fine wine and indulgent foods in a picturesque setting. Slip, working as a cook at an event for Sydney's upper echelons, revels in the irony that the servants in this case are 'the city's finest perverts and party people'. It is clear in this extract that she sees herself (somewhat cautiously) as part of this community, and there is an impression of excitement and a sensation of celebration about returning. This enthusiasm is neutralised by doubts and fears about the perils of the city; its various traps and temptations such as drugs and isolation. However, McGregor's writing here is essentially positive, life-

affirming and promising, allowing the reader to perceive that Slip is being enticed by some positive subterranean intensity back to a joyful life of perversion and excitement, where possibilities are endless and intoxicating.

For Holmes, the impetus to escape the city are the ghosts that haunt him: the ghosts of dead friends; memories of his times of living like a ghost – addicted to heroin, unhappy and isolated; and the ghost of Eddy, his ex-lover. All three writers I have considered in this chapter see Sydney as a city of ghosts and a city built upon the bones (literally and metaphorically) of its brutal and brilliant social history. Park's writing in particular exhibits a sensitivity to this issue. Psychogeographers insist upon seeing the city in alternative ways to those which are suggested by an economic rationalist paradigm. One aspect of this, practised by Park, is to look for evidence of the past in the contemporary built environment; to be intensely aware of the ghosts of history and how they remain and influence the present. McGregor is also keenly interested in this notion. The built environment betrays the layering process of urban development. Everywhere one goes one can still see traces of lives gone before, communities that were once strong, now all but dissolved leaving behind traces of their culture, society and lifestyle. These traces remain as a haunting stain upon the buildings, the wreckage of architecture, the old signage, empty unused shops and closed-up venues – even the graffiti that adorns the bricks in alleys and laneways of the inner-city. McGregor renders clearly the significance of the past in images of places where the stains of yesteryear linger on, such as the subsequent description of a purportedly haunted venue:

The owners had shown them photographs of the walls stripped back for renovation. Here, down the brickwork stencilled by an old staircase, a falling figure clear as a shadow, the figure of a woman. A ghostly imprint of the place's history, once an illegal gambling den whose cuckolded owner shot his wife as she fled down the stairs to her lover.... Everybody had a ghost story. Shifty's Malaysian grandmother communed regularly with hers, the ghost a part of the family. Jimi as a teenage goth had conducted rituals in the Coniston cemetery to lure out ghosts. Stash told them of a woman in a yellow dress who appeared in the kitchen of the Kings Cross venue where he'd run a techno night years ago. (53-54)

McGregor's writing evokes the ghosts of people who inhabited Sydney's gay ghetto in the time when sodomy was still a crime. In doing so, *chemical palace* reminds us of the bashings, the wave of AIDS-related deaths before treatments became widely available, and the struggle of everyday queer people to survive and thrive in a world largely adverse to their existence. As well as reminding us of the past and its ghosts, McGregor's passionate narrative documents the processes of modification, providing readers with a priceless account of *bent* Sydney in the era that witnessed the beginning of dance party culture as we know it. Far from representing radical queer dance party culture as an entirely new phenomenon, *chemical palace* aligns it with an illustrious history of spirited debauchery and bacchanalia that still haunts the spaces and spirit of Sydney's inner-city; if you look for it.

The author's depictions of radical queer performance at the dance parties of *chemical palace* – in which disease, pain, passion, sex and drugs are explored – actually mirror her evocative descriptions of the city and its transformations. There is an incontestable affection for Sydney and a deep understanding of its unique eccentricities in McGregor's fiction. Through her characters' exchanges with Sydney's inner-city urban environment, and her sensual descriptions of place, McGregor composes Sydney not just from a unique and effective angle, but as a character; essential to the narrative, and with a distinctive and

consequential personality of its own. McGregor's writing imbues the city with an innocent but perceptive enchantment, as depicted in this scene from the novel:

Holmes was in Bondi without a car so the girls did most of the footpath stencilling, Billy meeting traffic when she finished work at the Royal. The city after midnight on a Monday so peaceful, stripped back hosed clean waiting to be marked again. They started down at Whitlam Square and worked their way up Oxford Street, taking turns to hold down the stencil. Up to the Albury across the road back down the other side, they worked fuelled by the excitement stopping at Gilligan's Island for a quick cigarette. Falling into bed at dawn falling into sleep while others woke and walked the red stencilled trail of the woodland faun through the modern city. (46)

The psychogeographic mode of this portrayal gives it astonishing fluidity and movement, making McGregor's mapping of the city seem authentic and engaging. We feel ourselves carried along in the action. It is not just the distinguishing images of real places, and the use of place names, that make this extract uniquely 'Sydney', but the specific way in which McGregor's images of place evoke sensations of excitement and possibility. She represents the city as wild, wonderful, chaotic and free. McGregor says the following of her relationship (and that of her community) to Sydney in the 90s:

Also, ownership of the streets was pretty strong. With the Sodom Circus, the guys who put on HOmo Eclectus parties, we did private parties, in which we performed in the streets all across the inner-city. These progressive dinner parties started in the afternoon and roamed around Surry Hills, Darlo, all the way to Balmain through Lilyfield. The academy would call this sort of performance 'Interventions'. (Int. 2.)

The characters of *chemical palace* create and maintain an active, rather than passive relationship to the streets through these performances and progressive use of urban spaces. This same active relationship characterises psychogeography, whose practitioners undertook like activities, such as theatrical interventions which involved a conscious re-defining of the potential uses for urban environments. If we view the Sydney of *chemical palace* through the lens of psychogeography it assists us to further understand the deep centrality of the notion of play, especially as it relates to geographical surroundings.

Psychogeography and the notion of 'the scene'

The model of psychogeography may also be utilised to facilitate an enhanced understanding of the nature of the scene. In the same way psychogeographers view city-scapes by examining the correlation between physical and metaphysical space, and between structural and emotional architecture, we may comprehend the scene as the resulting space between the people and places of gay ghetto. The scene is not simply a famous street (Oxford Street in Sydney, Chapel Street in Melbourne) with its pubs, clubs and cafés, but also the people and events that characterise the space. Oxford Street and Darlinghurst have housed queer venues and been the site of queer struggles for decades, and the ghosts of the gay rights movement are ever-present in its physical and metaphysical spaces. Alongside the broader gay scene, the alternative scene has its own psychogeographic map, comprising the unorthodox venues and places where the radical queers 'hang out' and are seen. So, *chemical palace* presents a freak psychogeography of inner-city Sydney and the radical dance party scene, where 'scene' articulates the relationship between the places and the imaginings of participants.

The relationships of individual characters to mainstream and alternative scenes in inner-city Sydney is critical to the themes and messages of McGregor's novel, and these

relationships change over time for each character. Personal experience, as well as the relative age and stage of a person's life, can inform their views of the scene. The following depicts Billy's attitude to her life in Sydney, as she grows weary of the scene and begins to crave overseas travel and adventure:

She walked the city at night thinking of others she had never seen. Towards the lights of Chinatown imagining Kowloon across Pitt Street, the Ramblas behind Taylor Square, San Francisco Bay from Jim's Beare Park window or the Statue of Liberty, but there was only fog rolling in from the Heads and the same endless deep sky, the same equivocal attitude in everybody's expression, the same declivity back down to the warehouse opening like files the different vistas of each laneway. (66)

Through her various characters' fluctuating stages of infatuation and disillusionment with the city, McGregor articulates a passionate but impartial inspection. Billy's emergent desire to abscond grows from a sensation of the city as suffocating and closing-in on her. This desire is counter-posed with traffic's fervent love of and exhilaration for the city, offering the reader diverse perspectives. We see that being part of the radical queer scene can be joyful, enriching, rewarding and energising, but it can also be stifling and dissatisfying, as it eventually becomes for Billy. McGregor's love of the city is bound up in having been a part of the culture described in *chemical palace*, but it also springs from earlier childhood experience. She says: 'My connection to Sydney is very much tied up with growing up on the harbour, living by the ocean. The water stuff.' (Int. 1.) It is arguable that *chemical palace* represents McGregor's most *ambitious* attempt at recording and demonstrating her love for the city of Sydney, but the novel also depicts the modifications to the city that she most abhors. In 2005, McGregor reiterated her commitment to writing about the city, but also said:

... I don't really love the city now as I did then – the stainless steel pine finish real estate that it is now, I mean. I am committed to writing about Sydney for the indefinite future, but as we're in a phase I so intensely dislike in so many ways, my feelings for the city have become complicated. I'm committed, I think, from a sense of destiny, cultural custodianship, responsibility if you like. My next novel will be a much more dystopic view. (Int. 1.)

Some audiences may perceive that *chemical palace* itself presents a dystopic view of Sydney; certainly this is an error made by a number of the reviewers whose articles I have discussed. While the ways in which the city is represented in McGregor's writing are complex, *chemical palace* illustrates that the city of Sydney is her muse. Any sophisticated presentation of this complex and ravaged city must convey an ambivalence that matches equally its infatuation:

It's the extremes that interest me: extremes of pretension, of wealth on display, of self-expression; and extremes of marginalisation, disadvantage, violence and racism. The hills are a killer on my bike: in every way this is an uneven place. I'm increasingly interested in the particular kind of bureaucracy administered violence and dispossession that redevelopment here involves. And I am interested, as I have been everywhere, in the intricacies of everyday life and the rich, particular meanings of place—historic, social, personal. (Vincent 126)

4. Bohemian rhapsody: the form and style of the novel

But actually, it's a terrific form, the novel. You can create a whole world, philosophise, dramatisé, question, describe ... it's one of the most fulsome responses art can give to life. (McGregor 'Ten' n. pag.)

As a performer *and* a writer, this is a bold statement for McGregor to make regarding the medium of the novel. Her love for Sydney is such that she feels a keen responsibility to sufficiently represent its exquisite complexity, and the novel form provides an adequate frame. There is evidence in *chemical palace* of a struggle between telling the stories in a 'real' way (with all the complexities, banality and random detail we find in life and in memory) and creating the narrative symmetry and literary cogency that novels require. McGregor maintains that in constructing her prose, she habitually begins 'with an image, place or feeling' and assembles a narrative formation around it ('Mutant' 218). In *chemical palace*, consistency of narrative voice, as well as unremitting symbols and themes such as disease and transformation, tie the profuse threads together. As previously explicated, the novel does not feature a cogent central plot and has a 'barely-central' main character, traffic (McGregor Int.1.). An assortment of plots co-exist, slipping in and out of the reader's sight with little fanfare. Some of these storylines possess facets of a traditional plot, such as conflict and its eventual resolution. However, other storylines and characters simply fade from view, never achieving narrative resolution. The character of Holmes, who is heavily featured in early sections of the novel, loses prominence as the narrative progresses to a concentrated focus on traffic and Slip in the latter half of the book. Carolyn Hughes says:

... we don't really get to know any of the characters because for most of them their existence is bound up with what is physical and external. They are put together as an interconnected group rather than all drawn around a central protagonist, although the character called traffic gets a bit more focus in the last quarter of the book... The narrative starts to follow her around towards the end, particularly as she slides backwards after breaking up with her girlfriend. (33)

What Hughes has identified is McGregor's unconventional characterisation. It is not that McGregor fails to develop characters, but rather that each individual's character is demonstrated through their choices and actions, and the short character monologues that intersperse the book. The features of each character are also revealed in the dialogue sequences that occur in the novel. Most importantly, explicating the personalities of individual characters takes a back seat to formulating the dynamics of the group. McGregor's task is not so much to create 'believable' people, but to draw a cogent picture of the scene. In earlier sections, the narrative is structured to provide for readers a sense of the pace of the community represented. The short bursts of narrative, changes in tone and tempo, and quickly-shifting perspective convey the vitality associated with group activity. McGregor conjures a believable community for the reader, using a multi-voiced narrative that is sometimes difficult to follow. McGregor creates this effect in two ways: by shifting the focus of the narrative from person to person among her main characters, and by using first person monologues to give voice to individual characters. The non-linear narration is a necessary and effective constituent of this approach. The reader hears the same events and periods-in-time described by several characters from their own perspectives, in a seemingly random order. No particular version of events or individual perspective is presented as essential or true. It is through the use of such techniques that McGregor sets the scene for her novel to function as a communal memoir of the community represented. With its multi-vocal perspective, divergent tempo and nostalgic

philosophising, *chemical palace* reads sometimes as a celebration of radical dance scenes, and at others as an elegy for their demise. However, no matter the voice or character, the novel is always a 'bohemian rhapsody'.

The author's perceptions of Sydney's landscapes, and her passionate awareness of place, shape the style of *chemical palace*, making it psychogeographic. However, the influence of music is brought to bear equally upon the construction of the novel's narrative form. The structure and movement of the narrative intentionally resembles improvised styles of music, specifically a DJ's 'set'. McGregor's novel has been both praised and derided for this non-novelistic, circular structure, and unconventional characterisation, which make it unique even among McGregor's own work. The novel has no discernible beginning, middle and end; jumping around different points in time, telling and retelling events, and slipping without warning from a third person narrative perspective to an individual character's viewpoint. McGregor also utilises inserted non-novelistic media, such as small sections of poetry, song lyrics, lists and non-literary devices such as dance-party fliers and a 'Fag Rag' advert. In seeking to explain McGregor's motivations and the effects created by her employment of these techniques, Eugene P. Kirk's (1980) definition of 'Menippean Satire' offers useful vocabulary and analytical tools. However, before discussing the merits of framing *chemical palace* as a Menippean text, I will first consider possible genres, and McGregor's statement that the novel is 'aleatoric' ('Mutant' 228).

The definition of 'aleatoric' is two-fold: the first component refers to the notion of chance, deriving from the Latin 'aleator' – dice player¹⁷ (in relation to gambling). Thus, aleatoric can be interpreted to mean 'depending on the throw of a die', but it can also denote music and other forms of art that involve elements of random choice during composition or performance (improvisation)¹⁸. Some reviewers have criticised the novel as rambling and 'plotless', but viewed within a frame of aleatoric composition, the novel's non-linear, non-chronological fluidity can be understood as a conscious foray into alternative narrative construction. McGregor lyrically illustrates this process:

As imagistic as my writing has always been, I write mainly with my ears, constructing a narrative in a way similar to a musician constructing a piece of music. Each character is like an instrument, their interactions creating particular discords and harmonies. Each character has his or her idiosyncratic range and tone. In the final drafts of a story, I begin to hear where someone should come in more clearly, I literally finetune. ('Mutant' 228)

Beginning with the author's own claims about her narrative technique, we can discuss genre, style and use of language in *chemical palace*. I wish to explore to what extent the novel is aleatoric, and in what ways. Which sets of vocabulary help us to comprehend McGregor's eclectic style? Which vocabularies are counterproductive to this aim? In considering the style, structure and potential generic classifications for *chemical palace*, it is valuable to consider the critical responses to the novel – largely book reviews.

¹⁷ OED Online: 'Origin: late 17th century: from Latin aleatorius, from aleator 'dice player', from alea 'die'. <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/view/entry/m_en_gb0018050#m_en_gb0018050>

¹⁸ Aleatoric (adjective): a) 'depending on the throw of a die or on chance; random'. b) 'relating to or denoting music or other forms of art involving elements of random choice (sometimes using statistical or computer techniques) during their composition, production, or performance'. Oxford English Dictionary Online. <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/view/entry/m_en_gb0018050#m_en_gb0018050>

Out of grunge...

Aside from Davidson's article, there is little substantive critical material published that discusses *chemical palace*. However, there are a number of reviews available online from which we can glean significant insight into the popular reception of the novel. Reviews can be found on the publisher's website, bookshop websites, newspapers, including the *Sydney Morning Herald* (2002), and in numerous online literary communities. In analysing book reviews, it is useful to bear in mind the context in which they appear, which is generally commercial rather than academic. Some reviewers fail to explore the literary features of the novel in favour of focusing on its genre. The novel emerged at a time when 'grunge fiction' in Australia had just finished enjoying its stint of popularity. It is understandable, then, that reviewers tend to connect *chemical palace* with the phenomenon of grunge fiction; a connection that appears to please some reviewers, while turning others off the book completely. The idea that *chemical palace* is 'grunge' is communicated favourably by Carolyn Hughes in *Hecate's* 'Australian Women's Book Review' 14.2 (2002):

It's not cool to talk about 'grunge fiction' anymore. Very five minutes ago. Yet out of grunge comes *Chemical Palace* [sic], a fiercely written ode to the Sydney queer scene and its sub-cultures. (33)

Alternatively, Dean Durber's review poses the generic label as a negative, referring to the novel as extremist drug fiction, which he claims are too common. Durber says:

Possibly the most annoying thing about drug tales is not that they are in-your-face, radical and may cause offence to certain viewers – If they could still manage to do that, they might be a bit more compelling – there just seems to be too many of them around right now. Like a bag full of little white pills floating past dazed and hallucinating eyes; too many, and yet never quite enough to satisfy generational addiction. (para. 1)

Durber's view of *chemical palace* as a gritty tale trying to cash in on the popularity of 1990s grunge realism, is simplistic and reductionist. Hughes, on the other hand, perceives the essence of the book, and her review encapsulates its philosophical facets. She reveals that *chemical palace* 'is also a tale of intensity and excess, and of the relationship between the sub-cultures and the city they inhabit.' (33) However, Hughes has inadvertently done the novel an injustice by placing it into the basket of grunge fiction. Yes, *chemical palace* was 'born of' the context in which grunge fiction was prevalent in Australia, and the novel contains drugs and sex, like all grunge fiction, but close analysis of the text reveals this generic classification to be problematic. The label of 'grunge' does not suit the tone in the narrative, the carnivalesque spirit, or the 'morals' conveyed by the text. As well as being inappropriate for *chemical palace*, 'grunge fiction' was not actually a commercially-beneficial label in 2002, as its popularity was waning after a perceived saturation of the market in the 1990s (see Syson 1993 for further analysis of the marketing of grunge literature). To classify *chemical palace* as 'grunge' is to align it with an ethos and an aesthetic with which it does not comfortably sit, as I will demonstrate.

It is difficult to locate a clear definition for 'grunge fiction', particularly in the Australian context, but existing theory, such as Karen Brooks' 'Shit Creek: Suburbia, Abjection and Subjectivity in Australian Grunge Fiction' (1998), suggests that 'narratives marketed as 'grunge' locate their subjects within an exclusively sub/urban context' (87). McGregor's *chemical palace* is distinctly metropolitan, not suburban, as Davidson elucidates (151), and its subjects view suburbia as a soulless antithesis to their inner-city home, which is celebrated. Grunge fictions, such as Andrew McGahan's *Praise* (Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin, 1991) and Claire Mendes' *Drift Street* (Sydney: Harper Collins, 1995), are concerned

with challenging 'moral, geographical and social boundaries' and 'opening up liminal spaces that disturb established cognitive maps' (Brooks 88). While these same challenges may be a secondary result of McGregor's narrative, they are not its true aim or purpose: the primary aims of *chemical palace* are in its role as a memoir and ode to a radical queer inner-city community that the author believes is diminishing (more on this later). The novel is not designed to shock or disturb, or to present a dark view of the suburban Australian bourgeois lifestyle, and its resemblance in theme and focus to grunge texts is more coincidental than meaningful. In fact, as Davidson points out, the style of *chemical palace*, particularly in its presentation of sex and drugs, is 'resolutely undramatic' (144). The crucial divergence between *chemical palace* and a typical grunge novel is encapsulated in Sally Murphy's concise summation of *Praise* (2005):

Praise is a story about being young and hopeless in the Australia of the early 1990s. It isn't a feel good book and in places is quite dark, but it feels pretty real and has a pathos which keeps the reader turning pages and, if they were young in those times (as this reviewer was) nodding knowingly. ... Gordon [the lead character] lives in a world where sex, alcohol and drugs are far more important than work, and where planning for the future seems futile. In fact, for Gordon, the future is little more than waking up tomorrow and doing the same things over.

The most distinguishing characteristic of grunge fiction is the way it expresses the ennui and apathy of disaffected suburban youth. McGregor's characters are rebellious anti-capitalists whose disaffection with mainstream society is politicised. Unlike most grunge fiction, McGregor's novel is determinedly positive and life-affirming. Throughout the novel she insists upon the need for an empowered and self-directed engagement with culture, and her characters are the antithesis of McGahan's profoundly apathetic Gordon. The over-exposure of readers to grunge fiction explains why some reviewers are quick to place *chemical palace* into this generic basket at the first whiff of sex and drugs, but, in actuality, sex and drug use are never portrayed to expose a hidden seamy underbelly of middle-class Australia or make comment on the nature of modern society. Drugs and sex are presented plainly, as a normal part of the characters' lives. Even when characters go through periods of drug abuse, they are still involved in performance and communal partying, and most characters emerge from these periods relatively unscathed.

It assists if readers are aware that *chemical palace* is a somewhat auto-biographical text, recording a real community and moment in time. In light of this we may read the sex and drugs in the text as simply a component of that life, rather than symbols within the literature. Critically, there is a profound positivity and beauty in McGregor's sex scenes, unlike those in *Praise*, which reviewers of the novel agree are represented as ugly and alienated:

Early on Gordon, a mostly asexual, self-absorbed, generally unpleasant and unclean fellow, meets Cynthia, a sex-obsessed recovering drug addict who views intercourse as a necessity of life. They fall into an unhealthy relationship, with Gordon's conflicts over his distinct lack of empathy, emotion, understanding (whether himself or others), interest (he has none, and wants none) and confidence tearing the couple apart as much as it brings them together. Cynthia isn't a personality so much as a vagina, the opposite of the sexually uninterested Gordon. Cynthia also has terrible eczema and experiences an STD, an abortion, and an attack of cancer while she is with him. ... As bad as they are for each other, they cannot help their violent couplings. (Kelleher para. 2)

McGregor's novel provides what Davidson calls 'a familiar narrative of subcultures being co-opted, massified and diluted' (142), but this is very different to the project of grunge literature, which seeks to expose the sordid underside of sub/urban life and the mundane despair of

modern society (Leishman 96-100), as well as 'to change some of the things 'Australia' currently means' (Leishman 102). McGregor's text is largely unconcerned with the hypocrisies and failures of mainstream society. The novel stars the alternative scene, and is more a celebration than an expose. The themes of sex and drug use are secondary to themes of place (Sydney and the South Coast), joy (transcendence through carnivalesque partying) and change (personal and communal). There is also very little of the hopelessness, depression and dirty realism that characterise *Praise* (arguably the quintessential Australian grunge novel).

Despite these important differences, *chemical palace* shares some characteristics with grunge realism and can not be evaluated outside of the literary context of the late 1990s. The novel is said to have 'come out' of grunge (Hughes 33). This is an acceptable assertion if we assume Hughes means that it came *after* grunge, or represented a spin-off from it – a departure. McGregor's novel features some of the same concerns as grunge fiction, but takes those concerns to dissimilar conclusions, presenting an energetic ode to alternative urban lifestyles. Brooks tells us that:

All the characters ... [in grunge fiction] respond to the dynamics of sub/urban living: that is, the merging of imaginary constructions of suburbia, which 'define and defend bourgeois values' (Silverstone 13), with the reality of the material environment. (88)

Characters in *chemical palace* live in the space between these 'imaginary constructions' of Sydney and the material realities of its inner-city ghettos, and they rejoice in seeing themselves as abominations against the conservative white Australian sub/urban dream. However, rather than lamenting the failure of that dream and a personal loss of innocence, or submitting to cynicism and apathy, McGregor's characters celebrate their dissent and choice not to conform to these imaginary constructions. While grunge literature and McGregor's novel both reveal less-than-idyllic realities of metropolitan life, *chemical palace* does not wallow in the wreckage of the dream of modern Australian suburbia; its focus is elsewhere. The suburbs are not represented as places of hushed-up family horrors, addiction and personal ignobility, but as places that simply offer nothing to the creative and artistic queers that populate the pages of *chemical palace*. Suburbia is not the enemy; it just isn't 'home'. Grunge fiction also tends to be focussed on heterosexual characters, and often presents a narrative which exposes the acute failings of traditional heterosexual relationships and family structures. McGregor's text, by contrast, is overtly disinterested in the nuclear family, and its subjects are young, queer, radical, and, for the most part, happy. The book is vital and camp, combining lyricism and humour with hope and fantasy. Too much of what makes this novel unique and valuable is lost if the narrative is viewed through the lens of grunge, with all the preconceptions that entails. Hughes' insistence on making this connection leads her to claim that the novel is 'anti-suburbia, what you would see if you picked up Sydney and looked underneath it' (33). This claim alone is not too problematic, but equating *chemical palace* with the genre of grunge tends to lead critics to expect raw and in-depth character development, which typifies *Praise* and *Drift Street*. However, McGregor's characterisation is entirely different. Hughes claims that the 'characters are a sampler of alternative underbelly types and anti-heroes' (33), but this is a misreading of McGregor's attempt to portray people who are like those she has known on the scene. Rather than 'anti-heroes', they are in fact heroes of their scene – practically celebrities. The typical exoticisation of drug users and queers leads Hughes to claim that the characters have 'pasts that are rough but somehow *sexy*' [original emphasis] (33). There is nothing 'sexy' about losing a partner to a horrific AIDS death; or losing one's self-respect to procure drugs to feed an addiction. McGregor insists upon representing the mundane, wretched, and extraordinary aspects of her characters' lives in equal measure. Because Hughes and others have come to *chemical palace* with the expectation

of reading a standard dirty realist grunge novel, it is not surprising when they find the characterisation is not what they expected. Hughes protests that:

... we don't really get to know any of the characters because for most of them their existence is bound up with what is physical and external. They are put together as an interconnected group rather than all drawn around a central protagonist (33)

This is precisely McGregor's point: *chemical palace* performs the role of a minor literature, in which individual characters takes a back seat to the functioning of the collective voice.

While the ethos and message of McGregor's novel have little in common with grunge fictions, certain corporeal themes and aesthetics relate. Many scenes in *chemical palace* demonstrate the author's interest in the 'interplay between the psychosocial, the body and the physical environment', which Brooks highlights as an important feature of grunge (89). This is particularly evident in the portrayals of disease, drug use and sexuality in the Holmes/Eddy story, as well as Slip's experience with Hep C. In the section of traffic's story where she lives in the small, sparsely-furnished flat and is abusing speed (and/or crystal methamphetamine) we see this interplay between the body and environment take on a symbolic shape very typical of grunge fiction, where 'the houses they [characters in grunge novels] live in progressively deteriorate until they resemble the bodies that inhabit them' (Brooks 89). However, this is only a small section of traffic's story, and of the book as a whole, not a continuous symbolic movement or over-riding theme. Themes of communalism, freedom of expression, joy and transcendence are not common features of grunge, where the dirty realist writing seeks to show decay, depression and banality. To be clear, I am not buying into the homogenisation and dismissal of so called 'grunge' literatures by Australian critics in the 1990s and 2000s. I support Leishman's (1999) assertion that 'grunge was used by commentators as a pejorative term, thereby dismissing the value of writing by young people' (95). It is indeed frustrating that aspersions cast in the media by some critics of the 'baby boomer' generation have 'succeeded in averting (or at least postponing) any sustained discussion of the novels in question' (95); so this project seeks to rectify that injustice. Critics should recognise that McGregor's novel is a departure from realism, *despite* its realistic and unglamorous portrayals of drug use and abuse. The author claims that in *chemical palace*:

The world depicted is a chaotic one wherein rules are constantly being broken. It's a world of shifting realities, because it's masquerade, and because it's chemically altered – so you have shifting voices and viewpoints. (Int. 1.)

The departure from realism that McGregor employs is selective: she utilises lyrical symbolism to depict the elements of fantasy that are essential to 1990s queer nightclub culture, and romantic nostalgia in rendering characters' memories of the scene. In this fearlessly rhapsodic novel, McGregor resists singular generic classification.

A bohemian rhapsody

If not as grunge, how can we discuss this literary assemblage about the radical queer dance party scene? As an ode? A manifesto? An elegy? Queen's still popular song, 'Bohemian Rhapsody' (1975), is famous for its unique structure. The song contains no chorus and is split into six distinct sections, including an introduction (largely a cappella), ballad, guitar solo, operatic section, rock break, and an 'outro' which mirrors the introduction. 'Bohemian Rhapsody' is interesting because Freddie Mercury's radical musical construction breaks all the rules of popular music by employing a rhapsodic form, which is both impassioned and irregular. It is because rhapsody is aleatoric, and associated with improvisation, that I launch a discussion of McGregor's narrative structure in *chemical palace* with reference to the Queen

song. The fact that the community represented in the novel could also be labelled 'bohemian' is a pleasing coincidence. As McGregor's expounds, the novel's connection with music is keenly premeditated. She says:

I started out as a saxophonist – from 16-21 played in bands. So I used that musical reference deliberately, as music influenced me as much if not more than literature – (although that has changed since chemical.) I cut my teeth on jazz, punk, rock, blues – loads of black music generally, experimental – freedom music I guess, aleatoric music. When I got into dance and electronica in the late 80s I found all those elements again. I think dance and electronica can be the most powerful folk music. (Int.1.)

This musical metaphor appears whenever McGregor talks about her own writing. While writing *Indelible Ink* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2010), McGregor expressed her fantasies about her writing process, saying she dreams of creating 'a beautiful symmetry', but often ends up with 'a broken reverie' ('Mutant' 217). The author's application of musical techniques to the construction of the narrative in *chemical palace* is evident in the structure and shape of the work as a whole, as well as in stylistic features of the writing, and is particularly highlighted in specific sections. Just as music (especially rhapsody) is an assemblage, so is *chemical palace*, and the author describes her technique as a technique of assembly:

... I write mainly with my ears constructing a narrative a similar way to a musician constructing a piece of music. Each character is like an instrument, their interactions creating particular discords and harmonies. Each character has his or her idiosyncratic range and tone. In the final drafts of a story, I begin to hear when someone should come in more clearly, I literally finetune. ('Mutant' 228)

McGregor's insistence that she writes 'with her ears' is more meaningful still when we consider that she structured *chemical palace* like a DJ set.

The multi-voiced harmonic narrative is apparent from the opening of the book, with the first section reading like a vociferous chorus. Individual stories weave together to produce the chords of a community. Lacking chapters, the novel is divided using page-breaks ordered according to a rhythm that varies throughout the text, creating the continuity of a long improvised jazz piece or DJ set. This production is punctuated with modifications in the tempo of the action as the characters' lives ebb and flow. The initial medley of voices and character monologues gives way to the first of many rhythmic breaks after a nostalgic and lyrical description of Holmes 'time out' on the South Coast (19-21). A short poem (22) follows, and the top of the page reads 'Fashion attack!!!' (23) The sudden exclamation in rhythm and arresting of narrative tempo transport readers from a nostalgic and earnest reflection on the recent past, to a riotous moment in the luminous present, where the characters are preparing for a party. This and other techniques associated with musical structure are present throughout the novel, driving the narrative forward and providing clues for how it can be read. Musical metaphors presented in the novel also offer methods for discerning the deeper meanings of stories told in *chemical palace*. McGregor offers this glowing description of the musical styling of Mr Hyde, which can be read as a metaphorical key for unlocking the novel itself:

Listening to Mr Hyde was like travelling in darkness. An acid techno darkness etherized with trance and random samples. Rippling pulsating, black water surrendering fluoro motifs like first life or aliens. Sudden shapes of sound loomed then disappeared, you were moving so fast you hardly had time to see them before they'd gone. In a moonscape a tree, skeletal dying gone, and there a horned animal, leaping to coverage. Flashing, teasing, so you chased the music as it chased you. (72)

Because the narrative is built around interconnected stories, often reconstructed from drug-affected memories, aspects of those stories are elusive, emerging in seemingly random ways,

punctuating the rambling text with powerful moments of import. Using this extract as a key, we can perceive that McGregor's seemingly random re-construction of time and events in the text is not random at all, but follows the structure of Mr Hyde's music, which chases the listener as they chase it. As we seek to isolate one meaning in the rambling narrative, the narrative reveals another, and the new themes keep us guessing and searching as we read. But this key scene in the novel has even more to offer the reader in terms of its symbolism. Consider the DJ as 'Mr Hyde': this comparison communicates multiple dimensions of significance, connoting the fantasy aspects of the dance floor, the exploration of other selves and new possibilities, and economies of destruction and re-creation, horror and the grotesque.

Musical metaphors are even more profoundly developed in relation to the character of Slip, whose journey to become a DJ demonstrates a process of growth in learning to master the discipline, as well as the desire to play and share her creative work. McGregor provides for the reader yet another clue for comprehending *chemical palace*, in traffic's observations of Slip's DJing:

Eventually traffic would know to listen for each set's motif, like a key Slip cut one sound and locked it into the music hour after hour, filtered, reverbed, delayed, transformed. Tonight a pounding drum break so subtle by the time the next track came on it was a whole new sound, so powerful the entire dancefloor changed direction. (89)

Images – in this case an actual 'key' – are employed throughout the novel in similar ways, appearing and disappearing, popping up in disparate contexts to connect people and their experiences across time and physical space. The musical techniques of DJs Slip and Mr Hyde serve as an effective metaphor for understanding McGregor's *own* approach to the composition of her fiction. The following comparison between the styles of the two DJs can be read to reveal the author's conflicting methods, which have been combined (if not always harmoniously) in the novel:

But James melded things into forms you would never have dreamt possible. ... He saw the trees, she saw the forest. He heard the detail of every section immediately, collaging nuance, suggesting never telling. She compressed everything into the rhythm, a coiled spring a turban, combing and twisting every strand into one solid shape. He taught her to decorate. To see the possibility for new beginnings at any point, dare to highlight the bizarre at random make nonsense right like a dream. She taught him to strip back. To hold continuum like a path an elastic looping through the entire set, to appreciate simplicity always keep moving forward, to welcome silence as part of sound. (111)

Critical responses to *chemical palace* have celebrated or derided the text for exhibiting both of these styles at once: at times the text is pared back, disciplined and tidy, focussing on symmetry and symbolic completeness, at other times it seems random and unsatisfying, with symbols melting into nothing, characters disappearing and plot-lines leading nowhere. For example, the narrative charts Jimi's increasing use of drugs along with traffic's, but when traffic and Slip begin to form a new relationship, Jimi is lost and his story is never concluded: he simply fades back into oblivion behind the emergent narrative. While it can be argued that these narrative eccentricities are necessitated by the novel's project as a minor literature, it can also be said that McGregor is representing a truth about life in the scene – that friends are sometimes simply lost, people move on, and life does not always offer up tidy symmetrical conclusions. Some critics are uncomfortable with this aspect of the novel, or see it as a messy, unnecessary and ineffective technique designed to unsettle the reader. However, if we read the novel as a musical construction, this feature of the novel can be more thoroughly appreciated.

As Ley acknowledges; ‘McGregor writes well about the music’ (par. 6). Ley’s review, however, does not consider the influence of music on the writing. McGregor’s writing style is dominated by her experience with, and passion for music. This is evident in the rhythms – and changes of rhythm – in the novel; for example, where a nostalgic adagio musing on the past gives way suddenly to a staccato burst of group dialogue or activity (such as on page 23). The first section of the book, which has a palpable energy, is much like a fugue, with various character voices entering at different times to create a harmonious cacophony. Frequent codas are created by changes in the rhythm of the narrative, and these indicate the ending of various eras, both for individual characters and for the group as a whole. Perhaps the most transparent example of this technique is the short break on page 93, which comes after a lengthy capriccio describing the joys of the group’s second party, Scum. This one paragraph sits alone on a whole page and is structured like a list, recording the attempts they made to contact Anna (the venue manager) to organise the next party. The group is unable to make contact with Anna but remain hopeful that their venue will still be available, until finally they read in the paper that regular, more mainstream events have expunged them from the venue’s program. Below this paragraph, a simple line reads: ‘They had lost their venue’ (93). Rhythmic breaks such as this increase the dramatic tension and movement of the narrative, and are an effective way of depicting the change and loss the characters experience. Hughes criticises McGregor’s engaging and unusual use of language and technique, connecting it with a value judgement on the characters themselves:

However, the writing is so absorbing that it threatens to absorb the characters too. Despite their flamboyance, they compete for attention with the prose itself. The characters are also inhibited, ironically, by their excesses. They show how eccentricity and fetishes can be restricting. They are all constrained by their extraordinariness and suffer from alienation when confronted with the ordinary. When their freedom and creativity is threatened by the profit-driven mainstream, these people are threatened as well. (33)

Once again I feel Hughes has undersold *chemical palace* by portraying the characters as ‘in competition’ with the narrative. This is essentially a nonsensical idea, and one that betrays a subtle disapproval of their lifestyles and conduct. The prose in fact strives to represent the brilliance of the world that McGregor depicts, and the city of Sydney itself. As for the mundane, McGregor’s numerous and sudden shifts in tone ultimately produce a slow progression from a major key to a minor, as the narrative eventually sinks into a drone during traffic’s darker days in a later part of the novel. Ley muses on the possibility that ‘the best realised aspect of the novel is the way it captures the insistent drag of mundane existence’ (5), and these sections of the novel are certainly well-crafted in a literary sense. Hughes claims that McGregor’s characters ‘suffer from alienation when confronted with the ordinary’, but I would argue that they demonstrate great resourcefulness and optimism in the face of adversity.

There is an unambiguous symbolic connection between sound and ‘aliveness’ in the novel, as depicted in McGregor’s rendering of Slip’s inner world:

The moon wakes her the third night and she lies there listening. Silence, absence, the beginning and the end. She throws off the doona and pushes the pillows away from her head. Lies back in the darkness, ears beaming outwards through the cold blue air. Somewhere on the edge sounds are moving. Sea zippering wind through eucalypt canopy, leaves scattering along the narrow side path, the high groan of a truck taking a dogleg beneath the escarpment, endless clatter of a long slow coal train. And close like a skin the creaking of the house around her. Inside it all her blood pulsing through her body, liver, brain, heart. She’s breathing, she’s awake, she can hear, she’s alive. (83)

Vastly divergent from the scenes of playful communal dialogue and animated party descriptions, fragments like this give depth and intimacy to the novel. At the low points in the characters' lives, music and sound are presented as an antidote to depression, stagnation and illness. Seen in the context of Slip's Hepatitis C infection, her break-up and her 'hibernation' on the South Coast, this moment encapsulates Slip's cautious return to happiness and hope for her future. Even this intimate scene forges a philosophical correlation between inside and outside worlds, and can be read as metaphoric for deconstructing barriers between the self and the *not-self*. Slip's ears beam 'outwards', and the music of the outside world filters in, to energise her. Once again we see the world as a stage, or in this case, an auditorium, where actors (human, animal, plant or machine) produce reverberation and interchange that nourished the souls of individuals through interacting with the body and mind. McGregor employs Slip as a vessel for the message that people are connected to all things, and that the borders are imaginary. Slip is depicted as sensing this truth in the moment where her ears bring the world in to awaken her: 'Inside it all her blood pulsing through her body, liver, brain, heart. She's breathing, she's awake, she can hear, she's alive.'

Intimate moments of reflection and introspection such as the above are continuously balanced in the novel with light and joyous descriptive paragraphs, where the communal experience is shown. The following exemplifies McGregor's depiction of dance floor experience, and demonstrates her sensitivity to the 'chemical' power of sound:

The long deep late set when the crowd had thinned to family, Fred brought the lights down and pumped out more smoke till the dancefloor thickened into disappearance. Mr Hyde saw the whiteness closing in as if the bottle had been polished and he was issuing forth now plying like a demon. He was playing outside of himself and everything he'd known, all the sex horror and ecstasy flowed together in a sea of celebration, the charge you get when your playing peaked exactly like lust. Sirens distorted, babies crying, fog horns on a harbour, a woman's sob cut midinhalation, sundry trippy sci-fi space sounds. Kookaburras slotted perfectly on the beats as they whooped in unison, then fell out of time with the last carolling laugh. And traffic and Holmes and even Billy on the floor below him, raising their faces in thanks and triumph. It was dawn and light pressed against the badly blocked windows, the party still full, people dancing everywhere. He put on the last track and when the lights came up traffic called to him through the cheers. The new voodoo dancemaster of Sydney has been launched! (61)

This paragraph, like the previous one in which Slip listens to the night, is structured around a list of sounds that build upon each other, creating dramatic tension, and both paragraphs end with a short statement which functions as a cadence. The mention of a 'eucalypt canopy' in the first extract is mirrored by the chorus of 'kookaburras' in the second, firmly locating the text in Australia. The auditorium is different in these extracts (the bush in one, the city in the other), but McGregor's descriptions suggest that these two distinct locations have more in common than might be immediately apparent. In these extracts, the list of sounds begins in an impersonal external frame, then leads the reader inwards, towards the body and mind, as if we are also hearing what the characters hear. This is an essential technique in McGregor's project of demonstrating what the clubbing experience can be, as it encourages the reader to imagine we are there with the characters – part of the communal experience. The scene where Slip is listening to the sounds of the bush and the coastal environment makes the critical connection of *all* sound to music. McGregor is insisting that music is in every sonic expression of the world. This undermines the reified position of composed music, and re-positions electronic music, with its collection of sounds and samples, as a theatre of the world. This expansion of

the notion of music communicates the author's view that dance music is a symphony of life, and unsettles the distinction between what is natural and what is artificial. McGregor's use of the word 'chemical' in the novel's title connotes the interconnected nature of matter, energy and sound. Through consuming drugs, melding bodies, moving bodies to music, or even just hearing sound, 'chemical' denotes osmosis – a transmission between inside and out, and a profound eternal interplay.

Depending on the throw of a die

Let us return to McGregor's description of *chemical palace* as 'aleatoric'. Some reviewers are quick to brand the novel's aleatoric style as a 'random' 'mess' that mirrors the brain's function during a long night on drugs (Durber para. 2; Hughes 32). Durber's review is over-focussed on McGregor's portrayals of drug use and what he calls 'inappropriate sex' (para. 4) in the novel, but it also unfairly summarises the author's narrative style and techniques as 'scatty, disjointed, random, erratic and confusing' (para. 2). Durber simplifies McGregor's process of representing the natural ebbs and flows of human life, as characters go through various phases, and he fails to identify the consistencies of style in the novel. Finally, reducing McGregor's writing to a drug-fuelled nonsensical 'rant' demonstrates insensitivity to the obvious musical and poetic metaphors and qualities evident in the writing. What is in fact joy in McGregor's text is read as chaotic pace. The characters' work in the sex industry is read as 'sexy' or 'edgy' while the author tries to demystify the industry, and carefully-constructed scenes where passionate exchanges take place between lovers are reduced to mere caricatures of queer 'promiscuity'. Furthermore, one can't help but wonder how Durber defines 'inappropriate sex' (para. 4). Tacky and diminutive images such as 'little white rabbits' (para. 5) and 'little white pills floating past dazed and hallucinating eyes' (para. 1) further depreciate the value of Durber's analysis of the novel. Book reviewer, Joseph M. Eagan (*Library Journal* 129.3, 2004), makes similar scathing remarks:

McGregor's themes are the alienation, dissipation, ennui, and disease of a subculture steeped in hedonism, narcissism, and aimlessness. The novel's seemingly endless cast of characters includes James Holmes, a DJ also known as Mr. Hyde; traffic and Billy, a dysfunctional lesbian couple; Sailor, a junkie who has an affair with traffic; and the Professor, another drug addict and an aficionado of anonymous sex. (161-2)

This extract contains two serious errors of fact: James' last name is not Holmes (Holmes is another character) and the Professor is not identified as a drug addict at any point in the narrative. More importantly, Eagan, like Durber, has misunderstood McGregor's representation of the scene by ignoring the passion and positivity with which she renders the city, the events, and the people. Even Ley's more sympathetic review makes unkind quips about the sex and drugs, but it also recognises the novel's accomplished dramatic shifts and symmetries. McGregor's narrative 'departs significantly from the orthodoxies of major-literary expression' (144), as Davidson says, but that does not mean that it lacks structure as Durber suggests, or is designed to confuse readers. The narrative is non-linear, even circular, and appears constructed out of fragments of memories pulled together by their relations of meaning. This *is* intentional, but it is not a technique designed to make the text unnecessarily complex. The narrative structure recalls the processes of human memory, the movements of music and the tonal shifts of nostalgic poetry. Basically, the medium mirrors the message.

Rather than deriding it as chaotic, erratic or random, it is more productive for critics to compare *chemical palace* to literature that utilises chance and contingent relationships of symbolism and meaning. Critics of *chemical palace* take exception to the apparent use of

'stream of consciousness' in the novel, without acknowledging the influences of Surrealism, 'automatic writing' and Beat Poetry evident in the text. Monica de la Torre (n.d) explains that practitioners of Oulipo, for example, wanted to write 'literature that could not be easily consumed and disposed of, literature that was always in the making' (para. 3), and this same desire animates McGregor's work. Her text is structured around symbols and themes, drawing the reader's attention to aesthetic symmetries, philosophical possibility and contingent relations, rather than consequence, fate or relations of action and reaction. For example, the usual narrative consequences of a character's 'descent into drug abuse' are not realised in traffic's story: there is no great comprehension of 'hitting rock bottom', followed by the renouncement of her 'sinful' damaging lifestyle (as one might expect from a tale of drug addiction). There are instead images of health and sexuality combined with and complicated by images of destruction and self-harm. Drug-taking cannot be placed in a neat category of self-destruction, as McGregor also associates it with creativity, productivity and even tenderness and love. The scene in which traffic pierces Slip's back on her birthday is saturated with both melancholia and exhilaration (368). McGregor's writing resists becoming predictable – or being 'easily consumed' – and maintains its elements of chance, and contingent relations. Revisiting McGregor's description of her style in *chemical palace*, we see that it supports a correlation between the novel and literatures of chance:

The story determines the style. In this case the story is more about the communal than the personal, so you have several narrative threads, and a barely dominant main character – traffic. The world depicted is a chaotic one wherein rules are constantly being broken. It's a world of shifting realities, because it's masquerade, and because it's chemically altered – so you have shifting voices and viewpoints. It's a circular world.... All of that would be reflected in the style. (Int. 1.)

McGregor's project of recording, even memorialising the radical queer dance scene, imposes certain restrictions on her writing: she must work to construct a literature that divulges a communal chronicle, while also establishing interior worlds for her characters and representing the complex relations of a contingent community.

Into postmodernity?

The term 'postmodern' has been applied to *chemical palace* by numerous reviewers, and this application is worthy of close scrutiny. Although the novel is, according to Davidson, 'obviously indebted to various avant-garde literary movements' (144), it is not sufficient to simply declare McGregor's style 'postmodern'. The label is applied to the text because of its stylistic collage and narrative disjunction, but this ignores its project as a piece of 'minor literature'; that of representing the unrepresented. Davidson describes McGregor's style thusly:

McGregor dispenses with many of the protocols of the conventional novel, including the division of the narrative into numbered chapters and parts, instead setting it out in generally brief scenes and passages of interior monologue. The narratorial voice shifts, sometimes undecidably, between the modes of first person, free indirect discourse and third person, thereby conveying a sense of the narration's thorough implication in the community it is representing. (144)

Davidson confirms *chemical palace* as a multi-vocal text. His analysis does not sever all ties between *chemical palace* and postmodernism, but it goes further than any other critique in recognising the crucial project of constructing a communal narrative. The desire to fashion a collective account results in stylistic idiosyncrasies that are similar to postmodern literary practice, and Hughes is quick to apply the label, saying that the 'post-modernist format slides

through vignettes to flashbacks to lyrics' (33). Much of her premise for labelling the novel as postmodern is contextual. She claims that: 'McGregor uses the style of the times to say something about the times that produced that style' (34). In fact, McGregor uses the tools and media *at hand* within the microculture she is representing to construct a narrative that conveys its specificities.

While some of these techniques are a product of the historical literary context in which the novel appears, Davidson explains that the 'formal qualities' of *chemical palace* 'mark it as significantly different' from (at least) the other novels shortlisted for the Premier's Literary Award in 2002 (144). The disparity Davidson refers to is produced by McGregor's unique combination of traditional literary concerns and methods with unconventional hypertextual intrusions and a multi-vocal narration. Another reason that the tag of postmodernity may be so quickly affixed to the novel is its use of techniques that suggest hypertextuality. These appear in the form of lists (84, 100-1), adverts and a 'Fag Rag' article (78, 58), and poems and songs (22, 29, 88). It is possible (indeed necessary) to separate these hypertextual features from a tradition of postmodern play and textual-perversion, and see them as the obvious, even *organic*, tools on hand to the author. Including fliers from dance parties (78), a list of genres of dance music (84), and even the infamous 'Hankie Codes List' (100-1) is part of recreating the scene in an authentic way for the reader. These media are organic to the scene and embody its rhetoric and discourse. Ironically, these hypertextual features could even be said to be the most 'realist' feature of the novel!

Another attribute often 'chalked up' to postmodernism, are the compound plots and multi-vocal narrative voice. McGregor's descriptions of the novel reveal that she felt obliged to tell the story in this multi-faceted way:

Inside *chemical palace* is a conventional novel about drug addiction – traffic and speed (crystal at the end) – which probably would have been more commercially viable because it is exactly the story people expect from the context. But I couldn't leave it there all alone, it simply couldn't exist without all the other narratives running through and around. (Int. 1.)

Referring to the stories of the characters other than traffic – their journeys, triumphs and failures – as well as to the story of the embattled scene and the city itself McGregor feels a sense of obligation to include 'all of the other narratives', because they represent the untold story of Sydney's radical queer night club scene. Dependable and efficient narrative structures that are successful in communicating the story of an individual character are insufficient for McGregor's task, which has sociological and historical aims as well as literary. When we understand the text as also a historical record, the snippets of inserted media, advertisements and song lyrics begin to make sense, as they perform a role of 'primary evidence' in McGregor's historical re-creation; like objects unearthed by archaeologists and used to illustrate a demonstrative description of a time and place. Furthermore, in accepting the text as another example of Australian postmodernism, reviewers ignore its (expressed) association with Park's *Companion Guide*. This link situates the novel in a self-consciously Australian literary context; that of texts whose major concern is place. Reviewers rarely grant this correlation proper attention, and the result is that one of the novel's most crucial themes, Sydney, is underplayed.

Daniel Gloag identifies a connection between modern communication technologies and McGregor's multifaceted narrative style, recognising the relationship of the 'organic' features of the text to electronic music:

There are no chapters. Instead, frequent page breaks distinguish periods of focus upon individual characters. It smells of an age where the written word is appearing increasingly and irretrievably in electronic mediums. Occasionally whole pages of the novel are devoted to the representation of flyers, newspaper articles and song-lyrics. (para. 3)

McGregor has an active and vibrant online presence, and the book covers the period in which hypertextual and dynamic forms of publishing were beginning to emerge. One could even say that *chemical palace* straddles this moment in history; its characters being thrown headlong into a time of rapid evolution and development of both the city and the technology human beings employ to communicate. Gloag also declares that the book can be read in a non-linear fashion, like hypertext:

The book weighs in at almost 400 pages, but don't expect much in the way of a plot. ... Occasionally events build upon each other, then the tension elapses in a natural way. It's important not to merely read this novel like an ordinary book. In resemblance to the classic *Naked Lunch* by William Burroughs, it is just as enjoyable to open the book at a random spot and begin reading. (para. 2)

Gloag's suggestion applies well to one's second reading of *chemical palace*, where it is satisfying to pick the book up and open at any page, reliving the tale in flashes, like the recollections of human memory. The novel *is* designed to be read from beginning to end, but it is difficult to comprehend the multitude of plots and characterisations on the first reading, where the group dynamic and the life of traffic dominate readers' perceptions. McGregor supplies a metaphor for this phenomenon within the novel:

James took the tape nervously, standing back at first, running a sceptical commentary over the top to the Professor. He listened like a predator, hunting out the tricks and weaknesses, she was too sparse too reticent, the tracks not closely enough knitted. You have to admit she's good though. I know Daryl I'm just saying. He waited to lose his balance as the beats spread wider but there was nothing out of sync. When the next track swung in fully he realised she'd been perfectly in time all along. He stepped into the music the second time loose, stayed the full revolution with his guard down. They listened to the tape for days on end, the end meshing with the beginning so you could enter story at any point and still travel the entire length. ... (79)

This meta-textual musical metaphor provides a clue for unlocking the story McGregor has constructed: as James (Mr Hyde) reviews the tape of Slip's early work as a DJ, he demonstrates that listening is an *active* process. At first the beats seemed almost 'off', and the sounds discordant, but when James 'stepped into the music' and 'let his guard down' he was able to fully appreciate the logic and intelligence of Slip's work. The symbol of active listening and shifting perception continues throughout the novel and is always associated with Slip. It indicates that McGregor sees time and memory as cyclical and continuous:

It's a world of shifting realities, because it's masquerade, and because it's chemically altered – so you have shifting voices and viewpoints. It's a circular world. (Int. 1.)

These claims resonate with understandings of the novel as a fantastical rendering of a carnivalesque world, supporting the idea that McGregor's use of nonlinear narrative and atypical literary devices is evidence not of a desire to shake literary conventions, but of the author's effort to represent the 'shifting realities' of the radical queer dance party.

While there are undoubtedly postmodern features in *chemical palace*, it is reductionist to apply the label prematurely, and cease inquiry. This label is a tempting shorthand (particularly in the realm of reviews), but one that does not open many doors in the project of critically analysing the novel, in either a literary or a sociological sense. If we employ Fredric

Jameson's (1985) popular definition of postmodernism, *chemical palace* does not obviously emerge as 'postmodern'. According to Jameson,

... most of the postmodernisms mentioned ... emerge as specific reactions against the established forms of high modernism, against this or that dominant high modernism which conquered the university, the museum, the art gallery network and the foundations. (111)

There is nothing to suggest that McGregor's novel is a conscious reaction to modernism, and it is not an example of the direct misappropriation of literary techniques to dislodge literary tradition. In fact, McGregor pays homage to authors that some would consider mainstream or conservative, such as Park. However, like the postmodern cultural productions Jameson discusses, *chemical palace* works to erode the 'distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture' (112) through its utilisation of various textual formats. Moreover, the novel represents a scene in which this distinction is constantly being eroded. 'Pastiche' (at least according to Jameson's definition) is not a feature of the novel, but Jameson's other common indicator of postmodernism, what he calls 'schizophrenia', appears in McGregor's uses of time and perspective, and in her narrative mutations. It could, for example, be suggested that the narrative is not told by a plurality of voices, but a schizophrenic expression of the author's voice. Equally, it could be argued that the flash-forwards, flash-backs, and flashes-across each axis of experience are techniques of postmodern schizophrenic (re)construction. However, McGregor's notion of play is divergent from the postmodern project of playing with signifiers by isolating them from the signified (Jameson 119). McGregor's *chemical palace* is a socio-politically invested novel, with aims above and beyond 'aesthetic cleverness' and literary experimentation. Her techniques are designed to communicate the inspiring pace of radical youth culture, as well as to document the nostalgic processes of shifting away from the past. It would be unwarranted to suggest that this novel is art 'about art itself' – a claim Jameson makes for postmodernism (115). In fact, as Ley suggests, *chemical palace* is 'a book that probably believes a little too strongly in its own mythology' (para. 5). This and other factors locate McGregor's book firmly in the sphere of the socio-political and quasi-historical.

Another reason readers categorise the novel as postmodern, is McGregor's inclusion of poetic breaks, which contrast with the sharp, witty prose and cool dialogue of the other sections. These sudden expressions of lyricism are particularly prevalent in sections dealing with memory and philosophy. The following extract, centred on Holmes, incorporates a lyrical rumination on waste and memory, and readers observe an abrupt change in rhythm, sentence-structure and punctuation:

For a week he went down to the sea every day, walking in either direction when the tide was low, around the headlands along rock shelves and coves and beaches. Stopping to piss between the shale strata letting the sun burn him, unpeeling his skin and shedding it into the tide his life behind him like a wake to the horizon. The metres of hair and nails, shit piss blood gas, fibres of worn out clothes, rubber and leather from the soles of a hundred pairs of shoes left in footpath cracks, fruit peels bones of animals he had consumed, used fits cigarette butts food wrapping crushed beer cans, essays burnt or decomposed. ... (20)

Streams of consciousness like this are common in the text, as is the frequent unconventional use (especially the under-use) of punctuation. The dominant image in this passage is the deconstruction and fragmentation of bodies, where parts of the self are left behind, demonstrating that the self is never whole or stable. The narrative is engrossed in thoughts of decay and the boundaries of inside/outside and self/other. These are concerns of postmodern

literature, but also queer literatures, where a history of homophobia has altered the way bodies are conceived of and constructed. Even more interesting in this passage is McGregor's reconstruction of memory: the simple intimate act of peeling burnt skin off of his body encourages Holmes to remember his life through a parade of images of all the waste he has produced. The tone of this extract introduces the haunting nostalgia that comes to colour the last third of McGregor's novel, almost threatening to consume its other features.

Examples of sudden shifts in narrative voice, tone and style are ubiquitous. The dance party scene on page 92 offers readers a vivid illustration of McGregor's syndicated narrative techniques; in this case an effortless slide from third person narration to open communal dialogue, where characters' voices are not separately identified:

The man with the rooster tattoo left the couch for the dancefloor and Billy and traffic stretched out in each other's arms to watch the party at groin level. The long late trashy hours, everybody in a trance, drifting dancing cuddling smiling. Boots platforms stilettos trainers wading the sea of water bottles, the flokati rug at last upright and dancing two of them naked, hands to amyl bottles in pockets up to noses back to pockets, hands on arses, swaying hips, Jimmy pinned to a column by a boy in chaps eating his nipples, Holmes shirtless dancing and smiling, Slip dancing beside him, Stash crawling over from the couch adjacent grinning slyly. Crap party girls. Yeh sorry about that. It's just not good enough, you'll have to put on another one. Fair enough. But I rolled you a joint anyway. You reckon we deserve it? Think of it as a consolation prize. (92)

The technique encapsulated in this extract is formulated specifically to communicate group experience. McGregor's humour in this and similar scenes is heightened by the lack of identification of speakers, a feature that is dismissed by some reviewers as an annoying and unnecessary 'postmodern' practice:

McGregor's writing style, with its sentence fragments, *undifferentiated dialogue*, and frequently uncapitalized personal names, confuses an already sketchy narrative. (Eagan n. pag, my emphasis)

However it is designed to mimic the authentic reality of a light-hearted group conversation, in which the identity of the speaker is often inconsequential to the flow of discussion.

Correspondingly, the communal humour at the come-down party held at the warehouse is captured brilliantly by McGregor in the scene in which the drug-addled group play Scrabble:

It was the Professor's idea to play scrabble, giggling with Mr Hyde as they cleared the table. The board an old one found in a skip by Billy, its missing letters painted in gothic script on thick white cardboard. By the time the eight of them had taken out their first letters the game was almost over. Scrabble on acid. The Professor went first. Egads! It's the recovery party! T-O-N-I-C. Fourteen.

This is even better. C-H-T-O-N-I-C.

That's not a word traffic. You need new glasses.

Yes it is! Twenty-three, but I put down all my letters. Which makes it about ninety-five.

Is that an ashtray?

No, it's a crab.

Slip, can you please pass Mr Hyde the ashtray?

Here. It's an ashtray in the shape of a crab. It's a crab ashtray.

Oh. How amazing.

Shifty fell asleep and Bee selected the best of their letters, throwing the rest back in. Q-U-I-M. A hundred and four.

What's that?
 Don't know. But it looks alright.
 The pubis.
 Oh wow, really?
 But it's not worth a hundred and four.
 No, I've undercharged as usual. A hundred and fifty-three.
 E-X.
 Bil-ly.
 Well I can't...! OK. E-X-C-U-T-H.
 What?
 As in excuth me I'm intocthicated. Two hundred and ten.
 Professor are you scoring?
 What'd you get?
 Three hundred and ten.
 C-R-U-E-L-L-A. Four hundred.
 Slip's in the lead.
 Is this game multicultural?
 But it looks a bit lonely all by itself in the top corner. Aren't you supposed to connect all the words?
 I think it looks rather fetching, actually. Holmes, pay attention!
 Yes Mistress. T-D-J-W-D-E-D. Word weary in Welsh, in case anyone's still got a brain. Who's scoring? I just got a thousand.
 Your go James.
 James, knock knock.
 Hei-di, yoo-hoo!

I feel like I've been looking at that ashtray for about a thousand years. (116-7)

The undifferentiated dialogue is not simply comical, it also conveys the philosophy of the group, who promote a rejection of capitalist individualism. Conversely, McGregor establishes an effortless shift from this communal narrative to an individual perspective in the scene where the narrative 'splits off' from the group to follow Slip as she goes down to the sea alone, 'stopping only when there was nobody else alongside, turning to see the shoreline warped and distant and the place she had entered the water indistinguishable' (119). McGregor's writing style is surprisingly logical and consistent once the reader has become accustomed to its various components. Be they communal or individual, lyrical or hyper-textual, all of McGregor's mechanisms combine in a harmonious way to communicate the multifaceted story.

Menippean? Numerous digressions

As significant as the features that distinguish *chemical palace* as an example of minor literature, are those which make it a *carnivalesque* literature. Within the notion of carnival lies the novel's central message: that to be active in the creation of culture is to be alive. I have challenged the idea that the hypertextual and unliterary intrusions in the novel are simply symptomatic of postmodern bricolage, and explained their inclusion as an organic component of the project of creating a minor narrative, however, these 'digressions' can also be viewed through a more traditional literary lens; as being reminiscent of Menippean satires. While *chemical palace* is not a satire, and Menippean satire is most often associated with pre-modern writers (prior to 1660), stylistically *chemical palace* consists of many tropes understood as belonging to Menippean satire. Kirk reveals a proliferation, within Menippean satire, of:

... unconventional diction. Neologisms, portmanteau words, macaronics, preciousness, course vulgarity, catalogues, bombast, mixed languages, and protracted sentences [...] tales, songs, orations, letters, lists, and other brief forms, mixed together. (xi)

It is regrettably convenient for contemporary readers to assume the inclusion of this kind of expression is a signpost of postmodern 'wordplay'. However, this assumption is often premature. Many of the features Kirk attributes to Menippean satires are employed in *chemical palace* to construct the somewhat disjunctive narrative that manufactures the world of The Chemical Palace. Bakhtin, whose *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1984) also discusses Menippean satire, surmises that the style is a literary expression of the carnivalesque (109). Interestingly, Bakhtin also introduces the notion of the 'polyphonic novel', which proves a useful lens through which to view *chemical palace* when considering the question of genre (*Problems* 5).

In describing the polyphonic nature and heteroglossia of *chemical palace*, Gloag notes the following:

The stylistic specialisations of Chemical Palace are innumerable. The format is as sartorially conscious as its characters. ... Occasionally whole pages of the novel are devoted to the representation of flyers, newspaper articles and song lyrics. One such page is useful activities for the restless speed freak; another two are completely covered by repetition of the phrase: Have fun, keep going... keep creating. (n. pag)

With its lists, songs and poetic breaks, and schizophrenic/polyphonic narrative style, it is possible and indeed useful to appreciate *chemical palace* as a modern, non-satirical Menippean literary construction. We can clearly perceive how connections to the genre may be applicable when we consider Bakhtin's appraisal of Dostoevsky's narrative style, which he claims has historical roots in Menippean satire (109). Bakhtin also asserts that this genus imparts characteristics of the carnivalesque (110), allowing us to make concrete comparisons between Menippean satires of old, and Menippean literary constructions of modern periods, such as *chemical palace*. Of Dostoevsky's polyphonic narration, Bakhtin says:

From the viewpoint of a consistently monologic visualization and understanding of the represented world, from the viewpoint of some monologic canon for the proper construction of novels, Dostoevsky's world may seem a chaos, and the construction of his novels some sort of conglomerate of disparate materials and incompatible principles for shaping them. Only in the light of Dostoevsky's fundamental artistic task ... can one begin to understand the profound organic cohesion, consistency and wholeness of Dostoevsky's poetics. (8)

It is astounding how perfectly this statement may also be applied to *chemical palace*. It appears that all Menippean literary constructions demonstrate a common connection to the carnivalesque, which imparts on the literature a distinctive logic. McGregor's *chemical palace* presents an exploration of generic possibilities and stylistic mutations in service of its 'fundamental artistic task', and the finished product displays a somewhat unexpected 'organic cohesion, consistency and wholeness', similar to Dostoevsky's 'carnivalized' literature (*Problems* 108-9).

Despite the long tradition of literatures that exploit techniques of heteroglossia and schizophrenic/polyphonic narrative style, well-read reviewers have dismissed the style as needlessly random and confusing. Eagan's review communicates the belittling attitude of reviewers towards McGregor's writing:

Lacking an overall plot, the novel relies on the varied sexual couplings of the characters and the openings and closings of party venues to denote the passing years.

Furthermore, McGregor's writing style, with its sentence fragments, undifferentiated dialogue, and frequently uncapitalized personal names, confuses an already sketchy narrative. The story is occasionally interrupted by the author's penchant for poems and lists, including a lengthy list of sexual 'Hanky Codes' and a one-page list of 'Useful Activities for the Restless Speed Freak.' Given its stylistic peculiarities and its excessive length, this novel could be an exasperating experience for readers, who may want to add it to their own list: 'Ten Worst Gay Novels of the Year.' (161-2)

Features that have inspired and attracted readers like Gloag, are used to justify Eagan's abjuration of the book. Ley's review also describes the Menippean features of the novel in a slightly condescending way:

Among the novel's numerous digressions is a page-long concrete poem built from the names of endlessly subdividing musical genres; elsewhere, the reader is supplied with a catalogue of reasons why it is important to think very carefully before choosing one's handkerchief. (para. 2)

McGregor's 'Hanky Code' (100) is, in fact, a signpost of social belonging and sub-cultural awareness. McGregor uses such lists to demonstrate cultural currency as well as to record or remember fading social practices¹⁹. This example establishes that the hypertextual and inserted media perform a decisive function in recreating and representing the scene. Bakhtin's definition of Menippean satire complements a reading of McGregor's text as a carnivalised minor literature; as *chemical palace* rejects 'stylistic unity' by exhibiting both serious and comedic features, and utilising frequent 'inserted genres' such as lists, poems and lyrics and media extracts (*Problems* 8-9). The use of 'tales, songs, orations, letters, lists, and other brief forms, mixed together' (Kirk ix) is not pretentious, but purposeful.

McGregor's narrative incorporates numerous 'brief forms' – song lyrics (22); a description of the 'moons of Saturn' in the style of a documentary narration (42); a flier for Scum (78); a shape poem of dance music styles (84); another shape poem (88); a 'Fag Rag' article (110); and a list entitled 'What I like about women' (135). There are also sections of text that defy easy generic identification, such as the following spirited monologue, preceding the description of Panic:

Good evening parents. Tonight I'm gonna take you on a tour of Club Bad, where all the bad little kiddies go and try to leave their bodies by various means and methods – anything necessary! – some things that you won't quite be accustomed to. So I recruit each and every one of you, with your own individual camera, so that you can take pictures of these bad little kiddies doing these baaad little things, for tomorrow's papers... So whip out your fifteen dollars and prepare to enter... Club Bad. (58)

This fragment is structured like the speech of a spruiker, a colourful address intended to entreat passers-by to enter the club. It is inviting, sparking the reader's fascination and setting the scene for the event to follow. It has the seductiveness of advertising discourse, but is presented in a format more intimate and less contrived. Intrusions like this transport the reader into the night-life of the text: we visualise the door, the steps leading down to the dark

¹⁹ Hankie codes represent an attempt to communicate sexual preferences surreptitiously. This helps avoid potential homophobic reactions to sexual advances or queries. This practice has all but died out due to the growing acceptance of queer lifestyles but is still used in the BDSM community, often as somewhat of a novelty.

basement, and we hear the deep pounding bass-rhythms drawing us into the den to the dance floor below. In a similar fashion, later sections of poetry and song lyrics in the text seductively draw the reader into the mindset of the characters and into the communal experience. The 'Fag Rag' article on page 110 imparts an almost historical realism onto the narrative, as if the story, mostly centred on individuals' recounting of events, is suddenly authenticated by the inclusion of a primary historical source. The article is fictional, just like the party it represents, but the form used by McGregor cleverly confers the impression of authenticity, reminding the conscientious reader that the narrative is based on a real time and place.

In seeking to explain why McGregor utilises this medley of textual features, I have identified three predominant reasons. The first is that hypertextuality is an organic style of the 1990s and 2000s that has become naturalised and ceases to be overtly postmodern. The second is that McGregor is using cultural forms influential in her life and familiar to the subculture itself. The third is that all of these Menippean features express the carnivalised nature of the scene and the activities of clubbing by depicting a cacophony of voices and diverse forms of expression. The apparent chaos of carnival, expressed in multi-vocal narration has its own identifiable logic. It may be bold to claim that McGregor's style is organic. The author agrees with this statement: 'The style is organic, but it did have to be trained. A difficult and delicate process' (Int. 1.). McGregor's amalgamation of the tragic with the comic, and of high-culture with vulgarity and explicit sexuality, articulates the radical queer scene's aesthetics and ethos perfectly, and the variations in tone, from rambunctious and infectious to defeated and nostalgic, emulate the progression of a drug-induced high, followed by an addict's slide into the mundane repetition of habit. The novel's triumph is its juxtaposition of these contradictory elements.

A transaction

McGregor's second novel is written to seduce the reader as much as any novel, however it is not designed to confound or trick us. While not successful at all points in the novel, McGregor has attempted to create a text that encourages the reader to actively interact with the characters and events, allowing us to draw our own conclusions about the themes and issues. The author has intended *chemical palace* to advance a transaction between text and reader, just as listening to music is a transaction. For McGregor the reader *is* the listener, and an active listener chooses to follow the author into the text, which fashions a unique experience for each reader. This is the same process as that between the dancers and the DJ; an empowering transaction between artist and muse. Dancing is an active form of admiration of someone's art. No doubt McGregor yearns to see the reader *dance* to her prose. This process of transaction is reminiscent of Oulipo, where the writers seek to make the reader 'work' (de la Torre para. 3). On page 84, McGregor offers a lovingly-crafted list of the different types of house music, in the form of a shape poem, which ends with the rather trite line 'I think therefore I ambient'. This list interrupts the lyrical flow of the proceeding narrative, demanding the reader's attention and interpretation. The list represents a shameless celebration and passionate ode to dance music, showcasing a technique McGregor has mastered; building intensity through the layering of language and symbolism. The naïve enthusiasm evident in this list feature is a critical aspect of its authenticity. Designed as a means of sharing her passion with the reader, these intrusions are a life-blood to *chemical palace*. McGregor's novel represents an honest attempt to communicate with the reader, illuminating the scene as well as providing testimony to its history. The author utilises every tool at her disposal to generate a chorus of perspectives that expose the complexities of the lifestyle, ethos and aesthetics of radical queer dance party

culture. Each character also represents a distinct voice, while expressing assorted elements of McGregor's own personality and experience. However, her desire to create a pleasing and coherent 'song' for the reader to listen to and interact with is frequently subordinated to the task of representing the community and the city she loves. McGregor's writing reveals a unique desire to 'do justice' to her community, and the memory of their time and place. The style that she naturally settles upon to express her subject matter – variously labelled 'postmodern', 'Menippean', 'hypertextual' and 'carnavalesque' – bewitches some readers and alienates others. The novel is aleatoric and musical – an assemblage of harmony and vibration, and it is best when heard.

5. The Grotesque Body: deeply positive

Three body bags were carried onto the dancefloor, little circles of dancers forming around them. Soon the shapes inside began to move, the zippers open. First out was a catlike person, all in white, white mask and two pointed ears. Tall and gangly, probably the Professor, unfolding his stiff limbs, ghoulish black circles for eyes little gaps of nose and mouth. Next to him something mechanical, metallic, bristling close-fitting headdress, spine of spikes and stumps for hands. ... The third creature, the smallest, resembled a headless chicken with skinny red legs and masses of dirty white moth-eaten plumage. (*chemical palace* 59)

Grotesque depictions and contortions of the human body form an essential aspect of *chemical palace*'s aesthetic. These colourful descriptions of costume and performance, and are fundamental for understanding queer culture in the context of HIV/AIDS. In aid of comprehending the manifold intriguingly grotesque images in the novel, Bakhtin's definition of the grotesque may be deployed. A Bakhtinian reading of the grotesque aesthetic in *chemical palace* demonstrates that processes of personal and communal empowerment are associated with the grotesque body. To understand the role and power of the grotesque in McGregor's novel, we must consider the emergence of 'modern grotesque', which can be charted through an analysis of grotesque images in the cultural production and aesthetics of Weimar Berlin, to which McGregor has been consistently attracted (Int. 1.). After charting the emergence of a modern grotesque, it is possible to discuss the historical and socio-political conditions behind *The Chemical Palace*, situating its unique manifestations of grotesque. Once situated, these manifestations can assist in developing a model of 'grotesque camp', utilising McGregor's imagery and drawing on writings from Susan Sontag (written 1964), Andrew Ross (1989), and others.

A radical queer grotesque

Substantial sections of *chemical palace* are devoted to describing costumes and performances that are fictional but inspired by actual occurrences and trends in performance and costuming from the era in which the novel is set. McGregor says:

Inspiration for the images and costumes in the book ... an overactive imagination and very limited abilities made me go to town with the costumes and performances. I figured that what I couldn't do in actual life, I could do in fiction. My mentors in costumes were the Sodom Circus²⁰ to whom the book is dedicated. Almost all the people thanked in the back of the book showed me something amazing with costuming. (Int. 1.)

Radical queer performance culture embraces the grotesque in analogous ways to the cabaret scene of post-World War One (WW1) Berlin; the Weimar era. In her illustrated 'Encyclopedia Britannica of Weimar smut' (jacket blurb), *Voluptuous Panic* (Venice, CA: Feral House, 2000), Mel Gordon traces the rise of sex culture in the era's art, literature and performance, and investigates the bizarre-ness, depravity, extremity and violence of its images and practices. Her study suggests that while Berlin's sexual culture was historically more active than comparable cities, it developed a particular hysteria between the wars. Germany's

²⁰ The Sodom Circus was a group of radical queer performers in the 1990s and 2000s.

economic crisis after WW1 created a climate of economic and social depression, during which huge numbers of Berliners became involved in prostitution. The era is characterised by ‘divine decadence’ and an increase in violence and depravity (Gordon 2). It spawned uniquely modern reviews and performances, and fostered memorable identities such as Anita Berber, ‘the most glamorous decadent personality from Berlin’s Golden Era’ (preface). According to Gordon ‘Weimar Berlin is a synonym for moral degeneracy’ (20), but sex was not the only activity taking place in Berlin – tourists also visited Berlin to dance! Nightclubbing was a massive and lucrative industry that attracted punters from Germany and beyond to indulge in hedonistic pleasures in a time of widespread depressive austerity.

Berlin’s preoccupation with nightclubbing was reviled by authorities, who attempted to shut it down. There were closures of venues and even mass arrests, but this proved to be ineffectual and practically unviable, with the courts unable to process the number of guilty parties. Berlin’s nightlife was irrepressible: people continued to indulge their ‘vices’ and the performances and reviews were politicised in response to the repression (20). Authorities tried other methods to discourage the population from participating in the sexually-permissive night culture. During a syphilis outbreak, propaganda was produced linking the disease to dance party culture: ‘Berlin, Your Dance Partner is Death!’ (Gordon 45) This kind of propaganda was also ineffectual and wound up being parodied in cabaret shows, increasing the socially-critical content. This process of resisting censorship through performance mirrors that of radical queer performances, where terms of abuse and social ostracism are reclaimed, parodied and examined by those who are typically their target. Even performances that don’t feature blatantly progressive content can still be understood to be resistive in context. Such performances may not promote social change or revolutionary action, but they express the view of a marginalised repressed minority culture. Berlin was a haven for an extreme, progressive and somewhat ethically-questionable sexual culture, but the dominant culture in Europe was still principally conservative.

As well as providing a prime destination for sex tourism, Berlin offered a titillating human spectacle, in which the grotesque held a significant place. For instance, Gordon describes the Gravelstone prostitutes of Berlin, who displayed various deformities or disfigurements, and were popular for ‘their own hideous allure’, and Munzis: pregnant whores who were paid according to the maturation of their pregnancy (45). On the night time scene of Weimar Berlin, the darker and more complex carnal fascinations were commodified. Post-war Berlin was stained by cruel combat and brutal hostilities, which inspired militant sexual desires and identities, and lent a violent edge to performance and sexual practices. Gordon describes a militant gay male organisation whose members called themselves ‘One-Seven-Fivers’ (named for a particular section of the law that repressed homosexuality), which was active two generations before Stonewall in New York (88). There was also a strong presence of transsexualism and gender-fluidity, represented by ‘Third Sexers’, whom we might refer to today as ‘gender-fuckers’. Berlin’s queer community included ‘Wild Boys’, characterised by punkish dress and ritualised and degrading sex-acts and BDSM. Some of Berlin’s street-workers had complex boot- and dress-codes, like the hankie codes described in *chemical palace* (100), to communicate their sexual specialities or preferences. In reports written by travellers to Berlin in the era, boundaries between alternative sexual practise and violence were often blurred, and some observers even ascribe to the culture a ‘sensation of doom’ (Gordon 207)²¹. Despite the reported violence and the poverty and dangers of their lifestyle,

²¹ Gordon quotes Stephan Spender (1951).

'most prostitutes claimed their lives were infinitely more liberated and interesting than those of their [contemporaries]' (48). This sense of liberation and possibility was articulated through 'the Kietz' (similar to the term 'scene')²²: Gordon describes the Kietz as the cultural life and cultural production of the 'underworld', the spaces where their preoccupations and experiences were depicted in songs, reviews, performance and art (48).

The Kietz was an expressive outlet for the sex-radical community and a spectacle for tourists. In 1942, Klaus Mann writes:

The romanticism of the underworld bewitched me. I was magnetised by the scum.

Berlin – the Berlin I perceived or imagined was gorgeously corrupt. (Gordon 193²³)

The parallels with Australia's queer underworld culture are remarkable. We encounter similar diction used to describe cultural phenomena that emerge decades and oceans apart, and the same paradoxical view of these radical cultures – Weimar Berlin is 'gorgeously corrupt', and Sydney's radical scene is full of 'beautiful freaks'. Similarities in the aesthetics and attitudes of these disparate scenes arise from commonalities in social conditions, which include social and/or religious repression, poverty, and the paradoxical commercialisation *and* stigmatisation of sex and drugs. Having established a connection between images in *chemical palace* and Weimar Berlin's Kietz, I enquired of McGregor if Berlin cabaret had been an influence on the novel. She confirmed:

Yes, I've always related strongly to Weimar Germany. But I wonder sometimes about my superficial take on it ... one documentary mentioned a club exclusively patronised by older men in military regalia, who bought young boys in the club. If that sort of club was happening next door to my parties in 90s Sydney, I would have written a very different novel!! Sydney seems tame in comparison. (Int. 1.)

She maintains that the 'interwar period' held a 'particular fascination' for her, in relation to the USA and Germany (Int. 1.). McGregor waxes lyrical on the excitement and aspiration of the era; characterised by flourishing cultural and artistic realms: 'african american [sic] music – jazz, blues, etc; motion pictures taking off, Busby Berkely showing how political camp could be' (Int. 1.). Australia was not immune to these forces, despite being somewhat culturally and artistically isolated from Europe. McGregor remarks upon the 'sly grog' culture of post-war Sydney, saying:

You have a whole range of volatile ingredients at play – mass migration due to political upheaval, pogroms, fascism and communism at the helm, the explosion of the pharmacopeia into popular use; emancipation of women, etc, and ... an amount of queer identity consciousness if not activism. I don't know how much of these elements can be found in late 20th century Sydney. Both were decadent times – both involved extremes of sexual liberation – both were bookended by conservative and militaristic times. Is that simplistic? (Int. 1.)

McGregor establishes equivalences between conditions of the interwar era, and those of the 1980s and 1990s. It would be simplistic and inaccurate to place too much emphasis on the historical similarities, but the political and social conditions of the two scenes are comparable. Both periods of upheaval produce radical underground scenes that share an aesthetic and an ethos, while frequently diverging in ethics and practice. The two scenes also manifest analogous appearances of the grotesque. The similarities between Weimar Berlin's Kietz and

²² It is likely that the term 'Kietz' is an adaptation of the German 'Kiez', which refers to a ghetto or small community within a city (see Till, 2005).

²³ Gordon quotes Klaus Mann (1942).

Sydney's radical queer nightclub scene in the 1990s are evidence of a correlation between state-based subjugation and cultural resistance. People *need* to party, especially in the wake of fear and tyranny, and people continue to party regardless of state attempts at suppression.

To understand manifestations of the grotesque in McGregor's novel, we must scrutinise the cultural conditions of the era. I am not qualified to make claims for Australian society at large in the 1980s and 1990s, nor am I interested in doing so: mainstream histories of Australia and Sydney have been much explored. My project is to illuminate the marginal cultures on the fringes of the Sydney gay and lesbian community, and their darker corners of vibrant and defiant cultural practice. However, alternative communities do not exist in a vacuum. The same historical and social conditions affect their members as those that affect the lives of more conservative queer people at any particular moment in time, and what interests me is the unique reaction of the margins to these conditions. The pervasive reality of heteronormativity and a history of powerful sexual repression of queer bodies and behaviours, means that queer cultural production has developed a strong emphasis on the body. The association of non-normative sexual acts with disease, pathology and amorality is widespread throughout human history. This has led to significant and serious consequences in queer peoples' lives. 'Assimilationist' gay rights activists have sought to demonstrate that gay, lesbian and bisexual people are 'no different to normal citizens' and should be given equal relationship status, and legal and financial rights. This segment of the queer rights movement has often sought to represent homosexuals as 'the same' (as heterosexual people) and 'unthreatening'. Conversely, radical queers argue that mainstream heterosexual culture is repressive and dreary. They promote a world order in which sexuality may be expressed through numerous permutations of desire, with less emphasis on sexual identity or 'labelling' of individuals, and with the aim of challenging societal norms of monogamy and reproduction. This is where BDSM, bisexuality, polyamory, 'leather'²⁴ and other radical sexual practices and communities come into play. The aesthetics and practices of these communities seep into the radical queer night time scene, giving rise to a candidly-defiant queer performance culture which strives to embody the complexities of *queer* (as opposed to 'gay') sexual and social experience. Where apologist gay and lesbian culture seeks assimilation and normalisation, radical queer culture and performance says: 'if to be free is to be a pervert or a freak, then we are perverts and freaks!'

McGregor observes the affiliation between radical queer left-leaning politics and the nightclub/performance culture of the 1980s and 1990s:

I think the 80s and 90s were more liberated than the 70s because queers and women got a lot more out of these times, as did kinksters. Another similarity is the political emphasis – even more than just politics, pretty much everything was reflected on the party stage. For instance, you would see a performance about boat people following Tampa. The night before a federal election, Pluto did a very heavy one with his lips sewn together and a swastika sewn on his chest. Or Lance C turning up to a party shortly after Versace's death in grotesque Donatella drag, carrying an urn that held her brother's ashes. (Int. 1.)

Radical queer ideas, aspirations and desires were not reflected or catered to in mainstream gay aesthetics, fashion or performance, let alone in broader Australian society and culture, which was arguably shifting to the right in the early 1990s. McGregor maintains that she 'received

²⁴ Members of the 'leather' community are bonded by their love of fetish wear, particularly leather fabric, harnesses and 'chaps'.

more incisive social commentary at parties than [she] did in newspapers in this era.' (Int. 1.) The parties also offered an opportunity for likeminded individuals explore radical representations of bodies and sexuality, and to plug into parallel international trends:

At the time of our parties – (when I say 'our' I include the Sodom Circus who produced the Homo Eclectus parties, where Ana and I performed) – we all discovered Leigh Bowery. It was like the Heavens opening. Here was someone doing what we were, and making an international art career out of it. (Int. 1.)

While mainstream gay movements sought acceptance and equality and attempted to normalise queer bodies, radical queers presented complex and diverse attitudes towards the body, sex and history. In *chemical palace*, McGregor describes a significant dance party performance where the issues of linguistic violence and verbal abuse are investigated. Of the two performers, she says:

In clear latex catsuits and hoods they stalked on stage and faced off. Drew closer then jutted their heads forwards and sprayed each other with a thick white spit rich as cream or a young man's cum. (90)

After rubbing this glue all over themselves, the performers then go on to produce an assortment of words and short phrases written on dental dams²⁵ from their orifices and slap them onto each other's pre-glued catsuits. The performance is a commentary on the function and command of labels. The bodies, naked but for clear latex, are thus labelled with terms of ever-increasing extremity and violence; from words like 'SLUT', 'FAGGOT' and 'FILTH', to more 'abusive' terms such as 'COCKSUCKER' and 'AIDS-CARRIER'. The brutality of these terms is complicated by the performers' reclamation of the invectives on their own terms. This produces an evocative experience for an audience whose members would be familiar with the powerful influence of such words on the lives of queers. Performances such as this – grotesque, extreme and politically ambivalent – are characteristic of the radical queer scene.

McGregor says:

In my party life at that time – as reflected in *chemical palace* – the prevalence of the grotesque was a fairly simple case of accessing your dark side. It was a reaction against the pretty boy culture that was so dominant – at this time Gay Culture was at its peak, and the peak was generally Pretty Boy. Sydney in general was fast-tracking to a Body Beautiful ethos, and we wanted to give that the big finger. It was also no doubt influenced by the literally grotesque depredations we had seen our friends go through as they died of AIDS. (Int. 1.)

The radical queer critique of 'the Body Beautiful ethos' encapsulates anti-consumerism and queer Liberationism. Radical queers revile any move to homogenise queer people by making them more 'straight' (in the beatnik sense of the word), or more clone-like. The gay male pursuit of the perfect toned and muscular body is posed as submission to capitalist image-slavery. Alternatively, radical queers deploy grotesque images to break through this phenomenon, trying to reconnect with 'the real', which incorporates elements of imperfection, light and shade, beauty and ugliness.

The particular manifestations of grotesque that are incorporated in radical queer performance are very different from the Medieval grotesque that Bakhtin observed in the writings of Rabelais. As opposed to the naturalistic, agrarian and crude grotesque in Medieval Carnival culture, McGregor's modern, self-reflexive and sophisticated grotesque more closely resembles the camp, satirical cabaret of Weimar Berlin. However, Bakhtin's theory of the

²⁵ 'Dental dams' are thin, sterile latex squares designed to be placed over the vagina or anus when oral sex is taking place in order to prevent the spread of contagions between the mouth and genitals.

carnavalesque insinuates a deeply positive role and function for grotesque symbolism that is applicable in all three contexts. To appreciate modern grotesque, we must understand its antecedent. The word 'grotesque' (in modern popular usage) has evolved to lose much of its historical import. It is now used broadly to denote images that are unnatural or bizarre, odd looking, ugly or deformed, and connotes horror and unpleasantness. In Medieval culture and performance the grotesque body was not simply horrible, it was symbolic. Bakhtin says:

The essential principle of grotesque realism is degredation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity. (*Rabelais* 19-20)

The human body is the essence of the grotesque. A grotesque body is one which is presented as distorted, exaggerated or *hyperreal*. It may also be a body or bodies performing unnatural or unsettling activity. Bakhtin describes the customary Medieval example of the 'pregnant hag' – a woman long past menopausal age represented with a full pregnant belly (*Rabelais* 20). Let us compare this to a modern (mainstream) grotesque image, such as the scene from *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin; 1973) where Linda Blair is seen to crawl down the stairs 'backwards', with her head and torso facing upwards²⁶. Both images display aberrant and distorted bodies, but the latter is an example of grotesque horror designed to shock and frighten the viewer. It is an image with singularly negative connotations. The former is more complex: the image of the pregnant hag in Medieval Carnival culture was an embodied manifestation of the process of life and death, an evocation of the way in which the old begets the new. For a largely agrarian society, this concept was seminal and universal:

One of the fundamental tendencies of the grotesque image of the body is to show two bodies in one: the one giving birth and dying, the other conceived, generated, and born. This is the pregnant and begetting body, or at least a body ready for conception and fertilisation, the stress being laid on the phallus or the genital organs. From one body a new body always emerges in some form or other. (19-20)

In its audience, the Medieval example elicits an ambivalent, humorous and positive response, whereas the modern example intimates that distorted, unusual and exaggerated bodies are horrific and terrifying. The same image of the pregnant hag may arouse negative reactions in modern audiences, which tend to be removed from the cycles of life and death. In the Medieval context, grotesque representations of the body promoted social resistance to religious repression by inspiring communal laughter and a celebration of the functions of the mortal body (Bakhtin 19). The body was secular, universal and classless, and it belonged to the people. Bakhtin argues that the process of *degrading* the body in performance was a means of reclaiming and communicating a shared humanity, bringing the performative discourse 'down' to the people's realm. Carnavalesque degrading of the body is essentially a way of re-enfranchising it and reinstating its power, complexity and beauty. If we embrace Bakhtin's suggestion of the positive power of the grotesque, we can imagine that what is ultimately a transcendental experience begins with a *descendance*: from the intellectual to the corporeal; from the philosophical to the sensual; from the world of art to the world of sex(uality); and from the realm of individuality to the realm of the crowd.

At an intimate community event called 'Queer Prom' in the Sydney suburb of Redfern in February 2007, a local performer, 'Zoo', presented an act typical of the ambivalent grotesque in *chemical palace*. Zoo sauntered on stage in a wedding dress with a prosthetic pregnant belly, dancing to Madonna's 'Papa Don't Preach'. As the song went on she removed her clothes item by item, until she was exposed with little remaining save the strapped-on

²⁶ This scene was filmed using a contortionist (IMD n. pag.).

pregnant belly. She then took a sharp object and slashed the prosthetic belly open, spilling fake blood and guts all over the stage and some audience members. The audience response to this recital was mixed – cheering, shock, laughter and surprise – but most agreed that it was an entertaining and meaningful performance. Like the Medieval images Bakhtin describes, Zoo’s routine incorporated a decisive degradation of the human body in its most profound state – pregnancy. We see the bride and mother stripped-bare and brought down to a primal level. It is critical to note here that the expression and gestures of the performer were joyous throughout the performance, not dark or violent. The power (and the humour) of this image for the queer community relates to the political and social ostracism of queer mothers and families, as well as to the feminist critique of women as mere vessels for reproduction. The idea that queer sexualities are defective because homosexual sex acts do not directly aid in reproduction is paradoxically celebrated, while the traditional role of woman as wife and mother is brusquely parodied. While many conservatives would like to prevent lesbians becoming mothers, and seek to enshrine the rights of the child while demonising the ‘wanton’ woman, Zoo’s performance articulates a powerful message that women’s bodies are not merely vessels for reproduction. The audience to this performance understands that it is *not* suggesting reproduction is essentially ‘bad’, nor is it promoting that queer women lack the capacity for mothering. The initiated audience laughs ambivalently with the performer, celebrating her confrontation of these issues within their challenging social and political context, and sharing her determination to deconstruct concepts of femininity and sexuality. The destruction of the belly does not indicate destruction of life, but rebirth of the life of the woman, as if the woman *gives birth to herself* as a vibrant and independent woman. By refusing her predetermined fate as a vessel for the lives of others, she asserts a claim over her own body, and her right to be a sexual and sensual being. Consider again Bakhtin’s elucidation of the pregnant hag:

One of the fundamental tendencies of the grotesque image of the body is to show two bodies in one: the one giving birth and dying, the other conceived, generated, and born. ... From one body a new body always emerges in some form or other. (19-20)

Performances like Zoo’s and the ‘dental dams show’ engender an ambivalent familiarity in their intended audience. Audiences cheer and laugh, feel solidarity and triumph, as well as empathy, pain and anger about the issues represented. Resonances with ‘the people’s ambivalent laughter’ are arresting:

The people do not exclude themselves from the wholeness of the world. They, too, are incomplete, they also die and are revived and renewed. This is one of the essential differences of the people’s festive laughter from the pure satire of modern times. The satirist whose laughter is negative places himself above the object of his mockery, he is opposed to it. The wholeness of the world’s comic aspect is destroyed, and that which appears comic becomes [sic] a private reaction. The people’s ambivalent laughter, on the other hand, expresses the point of view of the whole world; he who is laughing also belongs to it. (12)

Radical queer performance inspires its audience to a similar involved and invested laughter. Medieval grotesque humour was ‘life-affirming’: the people were not laughing *at* the performers, but with them. Radical queer grotesque humour is comparable. McGregor has constructed a sophisticated grotesque aesthetic for *chemical palace* in which images of disease, terms of abuse and distorted images of the body function as empowering symbols for the community. These images are employed to fashion statements about reclaiming the queer body, the diseased body, and the ‘freak’ body for re-definition by the community itself. Like Bakhtin’s Medieval grotesque, radical queer grotesque relies on humour: exaggerations, complex parodies and subversions deplete power from the negative, painful and damaging

stereotypes that queers endure. Through witnessing a humorous perverse *re*performance of horror and distress, audiences observe a rebirth of autonomy and commonality: ‘They, too, are incomplete, they also die and are revived and renewed.’

A key factor leading to the formation of a unique radical queer grotesque in the 1990s was the powerful negative imagery presented in the mainstream media of HIV/AIDS, and HIV-positive people. Fighting back against the stigmatisation of HIV-positive people, many queer artists and performers investigated the disease in insightful and poignant works. Radical artists refused to present palatable, sanitised portrayals of the disease in their challenging art and performance pieces. McGregor gives this example from the 1990s:

Brenton did an extraordinary walk through the ‘Art in the Age of AIDS’ exhibition at the National Gallery where he was in a full body-hugging latex costume that mimicked his decaying body. He looked fabulously grotesque, he was wheeling a drip, apparently the blue-bloods freaked. He is one of Australia’s best artists of the late twentieth century, I think. (Int. 1.)

Brenton’s intrusive installation piece is a textbook example of the radical element’s reclamation of the disease through adaptations of classical grotesque. Pathos and humour are fused in the unlikely and sombre context of a ‘serious art’ exhibition. The humour – demonstrated through exaggeration – is decisively ambivalent and ultimately empowering, as the artist (also the victim and object of ‘pity’) displays his own presentation of HIV, inspired by personal experience. McGregor comments on the discomfort of art gallery patrons faced with a living, breathing portrait of the disease; a biohazard moving unexpectedly through their safe and sterile gallery space. In *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* (Cambridge Mass: MIT Press, 1988), Crimp bemoans the lack of media coverage for ‘activist responses to AIDS by cultural producers’ (4). The art world was responding to AIDS in a passive manner, and one that Crimp concludes was essentially melancholic. Frustrated by the lack of emphasis on fighting for resources and political recognition of HIV, Crimp asserts that art has more of a role to play than simply raising funds for research (*AIDS* 6).

Like Brenton’s piece, radical queer performances gain effectiveness by disrupting ‘proper context’, and this kind of embodied performance inspired McGregor’s aesthetics of contagion and illness in *chemical palace*. HIV/AIDS affected the whole queer community, directly or indirectly, as Race describes:

The wide-scale experience and intuition of death [in the 80s and 90s] – the death of hundreds of gay men a year – was the backdrop against which the experience of coming together en masse – the presence of thousands of vibrant sexualized bodies – made a powerful, exciting and profoundly political statement of resilience and possibility. (*Pleasure* 24)

Mainstream gay communities responded by constructing a culture of caring and support, trying to overcome the disease with positivity and community spirit. Some vocal groups of gay men and lesbians even became sexually conservative, blaming the ‘promiscuous sexual behaviours’ of gay men for the spread of HIV – but those preaching abstinence were a minority. Most gay communities in the 1990s simply wanted better treatments, more social support and more education about the disease. However, the radical response was significantly more complex, as demonstrated by Brenton’s performance. Radical communities were angry about the slow response of governments around the world and the stigmatisation of HIV-positive people. They were also unwilling to accept the idea that queer people were to blame, so their performances sought to illuminate the hypocrisy of governments, the callousness of religious leaders, and the sadistic nature of the medical industry, which profits from the sale of

medications. The ‘sense of community’ that Race tells us was imagined at mainstream dance events – with very real and positive outcomes for gay and lesbian responses to HIV/AIDS – was partly criticised by the radical queer minority as superficial and regressive (22). The radical queer response also proposed a more candid look at the horrors of the disease and the poverty its treatment caused, and maintained the right of people to live lives that included sexual freedom and experimentation with drugs. Radical queer responses to AIDS held governments to account, taking the emphasis off of individuals and lifestyles.

While I do not intend to discuss the political differences between radical and mainstream responses to HIV/AIDS any further in this context, I am interested in the aesthetic permutations that resulted from that political partition. Performers in McGregor’s novel use grotesque imagery to express their fantasies and deconstruct sex and sexuality. McGregor describes the performance scene in the 1990s:

Boys tended to be stronger at costumes, girls at performance. For instance, the genitalia stuff would be more likely to have come from a woman’s mind. The usual reasons of penis envy and cunt reclamation etc etc. The girls were less shy with their bodies – I think this remains true – this female dominance is what provoked Man Jam. The main women who influenced me were Groovii Biscuits, Sex and Glita. There were many great one-offs as well. Artists like Christa Hughes introduced more traditional cabaret elements. (Int. 1.)

‘ManJam’, a series of performance nights in the late 1990s and early 2000s that showcased male performers, is characterised as ‘masculine burlesque’. ManJam was intended as an equivalent to Gurlesque, a women’s only lesbian strip night, which continues in 2010. Hosted by Sex Intents and Glita Supernova several times a year (in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane), Gurlesque has had a long and notorious career. These radical events are overtly sexual and promoted as ‘strip shows’, and performances are generally thought-provoking and intellectual. The performances invoke forbidden desires, constructing new and complex forms of beauty. More often than not shows at ManJam and Gurlesque encourage their audiences to critically engage with notions of what is desirable.

Characters in *chemical palace* demonstrate complex expressions of desire not only in stage performances but in private and intimate settings as well. A commanding and sensual scene describes the afternoon of traffic’s birthday, for which Billy has prepared a luxurious display:

On the night of her birthday, traffic came home to a room lit by a scorpion of twenty-nine candles on the cement floor. ... From between the clothes racks a creature appeared in a long black garment with upraised talons throwing shadows against the back wall like Murnau’s *Nosferatu*. It moved towards the bed with Billy’s gait and a mask of horror with a long pointed ivory snout, ridges of yellow teeth along each side. Netted sachets depended from the talons of one hand. Adrift in music, incense and airborne shells and chocolates, traffic fell again into her lover’s nightmares. (41)

The romance McGregor depicts in this lovers’ tryst is alien to that represented in mainstream media and advertising imagery, like that of Hallmark cards. Antithetical to the teddy bears, red ‘love hearts’ and puppies that are promoted as symbols of love in mainstream gifts and cards, Billy’s performance is an ambivalent expression of passion that takes in a spectrum of human desire; from tender to intimidating. It is a sophisticated presentation of human discourse in all its complexities and contradictions: ‘traffic fell again into her lover’s nightmares’. McGregor’s economies of desire and sexuality are constructed with fragments from cinematic and literary imagery, local and international artistic response to HIV/AIDS and homophobia, as well as a

complex web of aesthetic and philosophical remnants of feminist cultural production.

Grotesque camp

As well as ambivalent and essentially positive, radical queer grotesque contains elements of camp. Bollen describes camp as something one *does* rather than something one *is* (28). Writing in the discipline of performance studies, he argues that rather than a discursive statement about sexuality, camp is a performed sensibility (29). In order to execute camp, performers often utilise exaggerated gestures, walks or voices, and exaggeration is a hallmark of the grotesque. How can we understand the relationship between camp and the grotesque? Is camp *always* grotesque? An analysis of camp images suggests that they are indeed always tinged with a hint of the grotesque, and even of the abject. In his article 'Strategic Camp: The Art of Gay Rhetoric', David Bergman (1993) explores the relationship between camp and the carnivalesque, which he insists are not synonymous. Bergman recognises similarities between carnivalesque literatures and camp, both of which incorporate 'a network of puns, innuendoes, and allusions, arrayed with bawdy abandon' (100). However, he also elucidates a number of oppositions between camp and classic manifestations of the carnivalesque; for example, while he identifies the celebration of nature as seminal to the carnivalesque, Bergman says the following of camp:

It is in its critique of 'the natural' that camp grotesque may be said to offer a more radical posture of opposition than the carnivalesque. For if the folk grotesque pits the social against the natural, camp pits both nature and society against art. Camp, while nostalgic for the medieval festival, is self-consciously very modern in its questioning of categories. (100)

While it is more critical and self-conscious than 'traditional' carnival, camp is still largely ambivalent: the laughter of camp's audience is not removed from camp's subject, nor is it directed at the object or performer. The laughter-response of a queer audience to a drag queen's performance is an empathetic and celebratory laughter. Bergman argues that despite camp's departure from the carnivalesque, it occupies 'many of the same cultural positions', comparing Bakhtin's three basic forms of carnivalesque humour (ritual spectacle, humorous verbal composition, and oaths and abusive phrases) with camp's most common expressive forms: drag shows, 'queeny repartee' and 'the gay put down' (101). These are not the only expressions of camp, but they are its most visible, and in these Bergman observes key correlations with the carnivalesque. Arguing that the drag queen is an expression of the grotesque, with her exaggeration and artificial parody of classical beauty, Bergman also notes that drag has lost much of 'immediate transgressive power' as it has become more accepted (101). Radical queer performance culture seeks to re-inject drag and other carnivalesque forms of performance with the 'transgressive power' that has been lost through familiarity.

Some of the most interesting manifestations of grotesque aesthetics in *chemical palace* are those where camp images are made grotesque, and visa versa. The conflation of 'campness' with vulgarity foregrounds its relationship to the grotesque. In her still pertinent essay, *Notes on Camp* (1964), Susan Sontag calls camp 'a vision of the world in terms of style – but a particular kind of style. It is the love of the exaggerated, the 'off', of things-being-what-they-are-not' (para. 8). She also claims that '[c]amp responds particularly to the markedly attenuated and to the strongly exaggerated' (para. 9). Because the grotesque is often characterised by things that are 'off', as well as by exaggerations of the human body, similar processes are evident as those observed in camp aesthetics. To many viewers, camp behaviour is grotesque, because it exaggerates affectations, gestures and expressions. Our expectation of

'natural' expressions and gestures are related to expectations of 'normal' gender presentation. In her critical work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), Judith Butler illustrates that gender is essentially a noun, a 'deed' that is performed:

There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results. (33)

The drag queen's absence of convincingly-naturalised movements, voice and appearance may explain why drag is often viewed as grotesque. It may also explain why some gay men find 'camp-acting' gay men distasteful. However, when the grotesque body or image also demonstrates elements of camp, the response of the *intended*, sympathetic viewer will be ambivalent, generous, and essentially positive: 'it's disgusting, but it's funny', 'it's hideously gorgeous!' Sontag clarifies that:

Camp taste is a kind of love, love for human nature. It relishes, rather than judges, the little triumphs and awkward intensities of 'character'. . . . Camp taste identifies with what it is enjoying. People who share this sensibility are not laughing at the thing they label as 'camp', they're enjoying it. Camp is a *tender* feeling. (para. 56, original emphasis)

In other words, camp is ambivalent and inclusive, in much the same way as 'the people's laughter' in carnivalesque contexts. For those who fail to grasp camp's complexity, it can appear a cruel and superficial attitude that is struck to make fun of all that is serious, but:

Camp taste is, above all, a mode of enjoyment, of appreciation – not judgment. Camp is generous. It wants to enjoy. It only seems like malice, cynicism. (Or, if it is cynicism, it's not a ruthless but a sweet cynicism.) Camp taste doesn't propose that it is in bad taste to be serious; it doesn't sneer at someone who succeeds in being seriously dramatic. What it does is to find the success in certain passionate failures. (para. 55)

Sontag's romantic portrait of camp does not afford the necessary space for understanding the intricacies of radical grotesque expressions of camp, but it *does* reveal that camp is an invested sensibility.

Andrew Ross (1993) discusses the phenomenon of grotesque camp, with its various permutations and evolutions. His focus is cinema, a medium that is influential in the aesthetics of *chemical palace* and queer scenes broadly. According to Ross, through the cinema of the fifties and sixties large audiences became enamoured with the 'stylised morbidity' of films like *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) and *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane* (1961) (54-7). As a relatively inexpensive medium in the 1950s and 1960s, film was accessible to a broad range of classes, bringing the glamour and spectacle of opera and theatre to popular audiences. Ross suggests 'the decadent fascination with the links between glamour and death' that these films stimulated explains their popularity as icons of camp cinema (56-7). *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane* brilliantly and deliberately distorts mainstream icons of glamour and beauty to present a darkly comic critique of stardom. The film is glamorous and grotesque, tragic and comic, and it is highly stylised and self-consciously nostalgic. These features have given the film a cult status and re-invigorated a taste for the grotesque in camp aficionados. Films like this (in part) inspire the aesthetic famously characterised by Leigh Bowery – the aesthetic of grotesque camp. McGregor gleaned inspiration for the aesthetics and costumes of *chemical palace* from a rich and vibrant community of personalities and performers in the 1980s and 1990s, for whom these early camp films were a legacy:

From the Sodom gang Peter Schouthen, Raven, Lance Cunynghame were the most gifted and extreme of the costume makers. The names you are more likely to know are Peter Tully, David McDiarmid and Brenton Heath-Kerr – all Sydney boys now dead

who were very active in the 80s and 90s. Simon Reptile also. (Int. 1.)

The local Sydney scene developed along with those in London and New York, with characters like those McGregor mentions popular figures on the dance party circuit. In the novel we observe various incarnations of the radical queer grotesque aesthetic, including the 'Green Woman' – a costumed persona created by Turkish Jim – who is both grotesque and camp:

Then the time of drag, bad sad and twisted drag. ... Jim in heels suddenly enormous as the first Green Woman, her wide green skirt hooped with wire over scratchy pastel green tulle petticoats, green bouffant wig and green lycra mask that stretched down over face and neck to a full green bustier, the neck bejewelled with a choker of fake emeralds, long green eyelashes and green lipsticked lips peppering through, green stockings painted with blue-green varicose veins, long green satin gloves weighted with more emeralds in many rings, and an oversized lime green leather handbag. (103)

In fashioning the Green Woman, Jim takes the artifice and extravagance of drag and perverts it further to create a persona that is at once grotesque and glamorous. Jim employs countless techniques of make-up and costuming to create a larger-than-life, glittering and stunning facade, a character whose glamour adds intensity and impact to her repulsiveness. In the context of a gaudy, green-skinned, varicose-veined anti-diva, the jewels, false eyelashes, long nails, make-up and glitter (products designed to exaggerate femininity) take on a decisively grotesque character. The result is a challenging spectacle that unsettles the viewer's notions of beauty and femininity, as well as their perception of the art of drag. However, like much drag performance the 'Green Woman' is not a deadly-serious political statement, or a freakish abomination designed purely to shock the viewer, she is an ambivalent figure; her glamour is genuine and meticulous, her ugliness is perfectly gorgeous. She is the ultimate nexus of camp and carnival, intended to inspire both appreciation and disgust. McGregor describes the character as an anti-consumerist icon, a monstrous parody of the 'shopaholic':

The Green Woman is of course about Envy and Materialism. She is a shopaholic. She is also a genre in costume/performance, wherein the visible skin of face and hands is covered as well – with paint or fabric – so the masking is total, although the features remain defined. (Int. 1.)

In *chemical palace*, traffic's 'court jester' costume/persona expresses the ambivalence of a radical queer grotesque in an especially sophisticated way:

So traffic continued to follow the images that had surfaced by the dancefloor. Drew two high eyebrows in black, the centre of the left one veering to mimic the edge of the skullcap. A wide, full Leigh Bowery black mouth, a narrow green stroke down her chin, a small black tripod on her right cheek. There, that was it she had arrived at a new persona. The stranger in the mirror tried a few faces, a grimace, a smile, a frown, delight, then turned with a flourish to greet Bee and Ben ... Viewed by all as the court jester not traffic, she had been liberated... (89-90)

More than any other image in the novel, the court jester signals a new kind of camp. The coxcomb is not only a connoisseur of artifice, but also of illusion. She is a trickster who is deadly serious. She embodies the blurring of distinctions because she is an element of the queer scene and yet outside of its hierarchies, its pretensions – she gazes over the scene. The court jester is no longer gay or lesbian, but queer. In donning this outfit, traffic has reinvented herself and found her own symbol. McGregor's jester wears the traditional coxcomb/harlequin outfit and comical hat, but has menacing, distorted features including sharply arched, thick black eyebrows and an exaggerated stylised mouth. McGregor's jester is an intimidating figure of black comedy who revels in fulfilling the nightmare of the unclassifiable. An archetype of queer, she is neither feminine nor masculine. She is an unsettling image of

hysterical laughter and pathos, at once fabulous, delightful and entertaining, but also disturbing and macabre.

We must not make the mistake of thinking of the grotesque as a serious aesthetic. It most often relies upon humour and is ultimately life-affirming and comical. Medieval Carnival culture and Berlin's Kietz differ from radical queer dance party culture in many ways, but grotesque bodies presented in all three contexts signify (among other things) an affirmation of life, humanity, leisure, joy and indulgence:

In grotesque realism, therefore, the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all people. ... This is why all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable. (Bakhtin *Rabelais* 19)

This kind of ambivalence and awe is noted in McGregor's introduction of the 'Two Headed Monster'. When the costume is finally complete, Turkish Jim's friends stand back to admire it:

Oh fan-tastico! crowed the Professor, In-cred-ible! It's the Two-headed Monster! The General of the WUS Army with his hapless cadet! Out on the dancefloor his friends lifted bottled water to handless Jim's lips, aml to his nose. Many of the partygoers moved away disconcerted, sometimes even disgusted. The notion that it would be easy to get someone to help him piss was fine in theory, but in practice Jim and the General frightened the fuckers in the toilets until the appearance of an enthusiastic cowboy whose day job was special effects. (106)

The Two-Headed is a physical representation of 'two bodies in one'; with one body partially emerging from the other. Bakhtin describes this as one of the 'fundamental tendencies of the grotesque image of the body' (*Rabelais* 19-20). Jim's Two-Headed Monster originates with a desire to create a costume that reflects the complexities of monogamy and co-habitation, but it eventually becomes a personal exploration of Jim's own psyche:

By the time the clone's face was completed it had become its own personality. It resembled Jim vaguely but not Harry at all, Harry's moustache being generic, like Fred's, almost Prussian, old-world militaristic in this context. With its chiselled jaw, mean hooded eyes and grim mouth, Jim saw the clone was now a general, his own dark shadow, the forces that oppressed him. (106)

The costume represents Jim's ambivalent internal world in a disturbing, but also humorous, way. The vista he presents is grotesque; it even shocks many members of the radical queer community. It also – cleverly – alludes to homosexual desires, 'kink' and master-slave relations, as represented in the General and 'his hapless cadet'. Although it inspires only disgust in some dance-party attendees, the costume serves multiple purposes and contains complex meanings. For some viewers the meanings are mislaid, but this is of little consequence to the artist, who has created this costume as much for his own self-expression as for its value as a spectacle. Turkish Jim and Billy both spend significant time and money on creating costumes and the public display of these carnivalesque costumes encourages social interaction and reflection. Carnivalesque costuming is an engaged form of play in which practitioners invest much of themselves. Dressing up is part of the individual's self-expression and self-development: through adventures in costuming they build *themselves*. Consider as an example a drag queen, for whom dressing up may be an essential component of self-realisation. In these contexts, art is not a representation, but a component, of the everyday. As Bakhtin articulates, this form of play is not extra-curricular, it *is* life:

... the basic carnival nucleus of this culture is by no means a purely artistic form nor a spectacle and does not, generally speaking, belong to the sphere of art. It belongs to the borderline between art and life. In reality, it is life itself, but shaped according to a

The abject sublime

We cannot discuss the grotesque in *chemical palace* without also interrogating the topics of sex and the abject. It is tempting to dive into this discussion with lyrical gusto, as the novel contains generous carnal imagery: sex, penetration, shit and body fluids, people urinating on each other, fisting, etc. In fact, there is a rich cornucopia of lascivious corporeal material with which to play. Much of this material is considered abject by readers, as indicated in the reviews I have discussed. While the abject is unquestionably a concept that must be considered in relation to the grotesque, I would like to qualify that what may be experienced by many readers as abject would elicit distinctly different responses from other audiences: one man's abject is another man's normal (if you will). In exploring the abject in *chemical palace*, we must be mindful not to confuse that which is abject with that which simply inspires disgust. For the purpose of this study, I employ Julia Kristeva's definition. In her pivotal study on 'the abject' (1982), Kristeva clarifies that the abject is that which disturbs the edges of self, *not* that which simply arouses repugnance (1). The sensation of being disturbed can be feared or embraced, although our ability to make this choice is limited by culture and experience. In *chemical palace*, the social conditions are right for an ambivalent approach to abject sights and symbols. The queer represented bodies have already understood themselves as existing with blurred limits. Kristeva says:

It is thus not a lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a saviour... (4)

While her examples here are all decisively negative (in that they all involve harm against others), the abject is not negative by definition. According to Kristeva, to be called 'abject' a thing need only be something that 'disturbs identity, system, order' or 'does not respect borders, positions, rules'. Consider those into 'scat' as a sexual fetish (shitting on others or being shat on); these bodies are committing no crime and there is no objective harm in the practice, yet a majority of people shrink away from this image, from its abjection. When applying Kristeva's definition of 'abject' to *chemical palace*, we are best served by understanding the abject as that which is 'exiled':

The one by whom the abject exists is thus a *deject* who places (himself), *separates* (himself), situates (himself), and therefore *strays* instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing. Situationist in sense, and not without laughter – since laughter is a way of placing or displacing abjection. (8, original emphasis)

The abject images in *chemical place*, like the shit-smearred glove and the open arse (201), are designed to demonstrate that bodies can be stretched and broken (and put back together) in a process of seeking, exploring and re-imagining. McGregor's characters indulge in displacing and deconstructing themselves for pleasure and adventure. Never whole to start with, never coherent, the radical queer self (and certainly the experimental drug-using self) does not have far to go to split in two – to 'stray'. He or she sees him/herself as a *deject* and embraces that position to a variety of extents. Kristeva says: 'He [the *deject*] is on a journey, during the night, the end of which keeps receding' (8). Activities of sex and drug use that McGregor depict in the novel represent a straying, especially for traffic, whose journey is always continuing. As soon as the journey outside of the self reaches a destination, that destination disappears, leaving the stray to continue her journey.

It is fascinating to view the graphic sex scenes in *chemical palace* as examples of abject straying. There can be no doubt that the inclusion of the various carnal scenes serves an important symbolic function. The extremes of penetration and generous emission of body fluids in these sharply-wrought scenes add substantial impact to the narrative. One symbol offered by the author is that of resurrection. The act of penetrating Jimi in Coniston gives Holmes the sensation of being reborn (52); and traffic's indiscretion while Billy is away camping (146-148), gives her a heightened sense of being alive and vital: 'To look with lust into a stranger's eyes, touch new skin, kiss alien lips, to arc even wider outside herself' (148). The character of traffic strays more than any other in the novel in order to 'find herself', ironically by abandoning herself. This can also be understood as killing the self to give birth to the self. Bakhtin says:

The grotesque image reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming. The relation to time is one determining trait of the grotesque image. The other indispensable trait is ambivalence. For in this image we find both poles of transformation, the old and the new, the dying and the procreating, the beginning and the end of the metamorphosis. (24)

McGregor's 'arc' ('to arc even wider outside herself') encompasses this trait of ambivalence. This is the self and the not-self: McGregor's narrative promotes the idea that the dissolution of the self eventually creates the true self (if there is such a thing). It is the violent and sublime collision of the self with the other that gives birth to the self; a self that is always in process, is always becoming, and is never whole.

In her post-Billy phase, traffic takes GHB (gamma-hydroxybutyric), a depressant drug known for its effects on sex drive, and gets fisted by Donna (200-1). The experience is typical of the abject straying that traffic represents in the novel and typical of her constant search for sublime and *degraded* experience:

Donna measured out the droplets and poured two orange juice chasers. traffic waited for the drug to take over then moved into gear, moved into water. Down down blurred slurred guiding Donna's hand, slower more lube yair oohhh put on another glove. Her arse was already open, she didn't douche and dinner was twelve hours ago. Heavy limbless oozing across the floor, she was a camembert left in the sun, sap from the scission, molasses swelling over the lip of the plate. Was that her moaning over the other side of the room? Can't stop but can't get there, Donna over her the proverbial bull. Till cell by cell traffic's muscles began to reattach to bone and she stopped exhausted, I need to piss. (200-1)

The sublime is in the self's transcendence from the body. Through the innumerable actions and impressions of the altered body, traffic loses the sensation of her body as a coherent whole: she feels as if she melts, becoming one with what is outside her. The ego is dissolved. She goes on to further degrade herself, crawling down the hall to find the bathroom:

Crawled giggling through eternity head lolling thighs wet, in the fog an upside-down Donna crawling down the hall behind her. She was laughing too hard to move at all now, on the threshold of the bathroom, Donna gaining fast. Piss! Pushing through traffic's legs, Piss on me! And traffic strained and pushed and strained and finally released a schooner a cranberry juice and three bottles of water over Donna's mouth and chest. (201)

However, a critical aspect of this scene is the giggling and laughter. As Kristeva asserts, 'laughter is a way of placing or displacing the abject' (8). In this context, traffic's laughter places this image of abjection in the realm of the carnivalesque. At the same time, the laughter displaces the abject-nature of the image, rendering the image more accessible to readers. The

juxtaposition of this scene with the short statement on the following page provides a key (an opening, a frame) through which to read the scene that preceded it:

She loved them all. The girls the women the dark the light the slender and plump, the disgustful and lustful. Those so tall their barefoot embrace brought her mouth to the curve between neck and shoulder, the petite whose bodies could be wrapped in her own. A person was a world and traffic was on holidays. Cruising, looking, tasting, travelling. (202)

Equating sexual experience with leisure and travel, McGregor liberates it from the realm of morality and the sacred. No longer imbued with the heavy weight of symbolising and expressing 'love', sex is able to play a multitude of roles. In this case it performs the function of a child's playground, a carnivalesque space where limits are abandoned and people are 'reborn for purely human relations' (Bakhtin *Rabelais* 10). A child's playground is also an educational space, and McGregor's extreme sex scenes are instructive, adventurous and fun. They celebrate the kind of 'free, familiar contacts' between human beings that Bakhtin proposed as an essential element of the carnivalesque (10).

The image of the body of the other as a playground continues into the powerful sex scene between James and the Professor:

He began his journey in the crooks of the Professor's elbows, down with his tongue through the bush of armpits, over his chest tugging at the nipples, up the sides of his ribs feeling the Professor's cock bounce against his belly. He ignored it and continued across the soft stomach swirling around to the tops of his thighs. Then into the divet licking his balls, pushing his thighs apart to lick his arse. As though in the year or so since they had fucked his lover's body had become a foreign land. (216)

These images are as romantic and lyrical as any love-making session represented in literature. In fact, it is worth noting that McGregor often writes very beautiful (in traditional senses) literary moments into her sex scenes. However, this travelling, this seeking, this straying generally leads to decisive penetration in the novel, and these are the moments at which straying is at its most intense:

Then James turned him over reached for the lube and slowly entered him. Deep, slow, long thrusts, holding his hips, waiting for his lover to cry out and spasm then slamming his own cum deep inside. ... Talking into his neck, curling around James who was swimming already into another biosphere where he became ancient and essential and removed the oxygen from his body, and in this biochemical adaptation all the bacteria across his skin clustered into pores and began to light up, he was buoyant, shimmering, glowing till daylight. (216)

This scene captures the meaning of the novel's title – that which is primal and essential. There is an unmistakable spirituality (imbued with naturalism, even primitivism) in the transcendent images, and there is a sublime and intimate aesthetic in the description of James' postcoital mood. This straying has brought James finally to a place where he can dissolve: he becomes plant-like, rhizomatic and feels like he no longer needs to breathe. Bacteria, which are usually constructed as harmful and undesirable organisms, cluster into his pores causing him to light up and glow. James has been working on ideas for a sea-creature-themed party outfit and, in this context, the sexual interaction demonstrates how the fertile imaginations of McGregor's characters are developed through corporeal voyaging. The central significance, in *chemical palace*, of images of rebirth, rejuvenation, transformation and metamorphosis are also illustrated here.

As the novel progresses and the characters develop, McGregor infuses the symbolism

of sex-as-transformation and resurrection with a more complex set of emotional factors. The scenes that take place later in the novel, where traffic pierces Slip and the two have sex (367-8), are layered with intense and ambivalent symbolism. These scenes are situated after an extended period of spiritual hiatus for traffic; a time in which her life becomes small and desolate, and sex is rarely satisfying to her in an emotional or spiritual sense. By this stage of the novel, traffic's drug use has become a habit (the word is frequently repeated in the novel) and is no longer bringing her the same pleasure it once did. She feels lonely and her knee has become stiff and almost always aches. We see traffic's small unit (she was asked to move out of the warehouse due to her drug use) as a cold and empty place, and we feel that she is 'out of step' with the world around her and her friends. The narrative has followed Slip and traffic through their separate but interlinked lives. It is at this point in the novel that a satisfying symmetry emerges as the two characters come together (345). There are profound parallels between them: both have known damage and destruction to their bodies, both have been bruised by drug use and yet do not eschew it, and both are acutely aware of the intimate chemistry of their cardio-vascular and nervous systems. Slip's intimate knowledge of Hepatitis C and traffic's experience with addiction as an injecting drug user imbue the couple with an intense relationship to blood and needles:

What's this? It's my first birthday present to you. She stood passive, arms by her side inviting inspection. Slip unbuttoned her shirt. Twenty-four needles in two vertical lines from breast to pubis, each with a scroll of paper inserted in the hollow of the plastic ends. Traffic lay on the bed while Slip gloved up then one by one from the top extracted needles from skin then scrolls from needles. She unravelled each prayer and laid it on the table in order, speaking it to a heavy-lidded traffic. When all the needles were extracted she washed traffic down with calendula. (367)

There is a collection of biblical references in this scene: prayers, the sacrifice of virgin skin, a divine penetration of the skin, and Slip washing traffic down. Play-piercing is a ritualistic activity involving safety processes and a high level of trust and faith. McGregor is undoubtedly creating a sacrosanct and spiritual image of the lovers and yet the scene is also surprisingly relaxed ('a heavy-lidded traffic'). The carefully-included safety procedures keep the image grounded in the everyday, the mundane, and promote 'safe play', a practice that is especially important to McGregor. For the second part of the gift/ritual, traffic pierces Slip's back with needles that form the shape of the 'f holes' in a double bass:

The neck piercings with a larger gauge made her groan, she was rushing by then, sweat trickling from armpits. The last four were difficult, two either side of the divet of cocyx where the skin full of collagen kept escaping traffic's fingertips and the needles went in deeper, Slip squealing. Subsiding at last exhausted as traffic looped four strings from neck to arse and came around to her head and held it. Sorry, they're a bit crooked. That's alright. It's folk art. Eventually Slip rose and traffic stood her with her back to the mirror, holding another before her. So Slip saw she was an instrument, a cello, a double bass, and leant into traffic who pressed against her, face in her neck arms reaching around to pluck the strings. (368)

The pain in this scene is deeply positive and the symbol of the double bass is multilayered. Firstly, traffic has finally become in tune with someone and, secondly, it refers to Slip's passion for the bass guitar that she lost. The sexual words in this scene entice the reader to look beyond any previously-held associations of needles with negative pain or fear. Words like 'groan', 'deeper', 'rushing' and 'skin' give the scene an unmistakably erotic feel.

The couple go on to a sexual interaction in which both vaginal- and anal-fisting occur. The relative brevity, tenderness and profundity of this passage represent one of the author's

paramount achievements in the novel:

Later she turned her around again. Much later when the ice was wearing off and light was seeping into the sky she turned her onto her back, gave her the amyl, one hand inside the other on her belly feeling the movement of her hand through flesh. Slowly then she took out her hand and after she had inhaled began to turn her fingers inside her arse, burrowed and turned and opened and burrowed. By the time she was passed her second sphincter she could hardly speak, eyes rolling back breathing long and slow, looking at her through slits, whispering. Then she went completely still, shuddered, and in one sudden movement pushed her body onto her hand. (368)

McGregor constructs a shockingly intimate portrait of the corporeal contortion of fisting – not the prim and tentative fingering commonly represented in mainstream ‘lesbian porn’ imagery, which is usually marketed to heterosexual men. The fingers of the hand that has been inserted into the vaginal canal push up against the skin of the abdomen and the fingers on traffic’s other hand meet their equivalents through skin and muscle. This ultimate illustration of penetration has abject and grotesque qualities, while expressing the profound fragility and strength of the human body. Such a complete act of penetration traverses the edges and blurs the boundaries between traffic’s and Slip’s bodies. A similar process occurs with the anal-fisting, except that it is magnified: the image is more abject and extreme because of the social taboos associated with anal sex. The lovers traverse physical and symbolic voids: they are rebels, resisting and overcoming defined boundaries and roles to create their own sublime. McGregor mentions earlier in the novel that Billy was not interested in letting traffic touch her in the anal area, so there is a satisfying symmetry and immense power in the final revelation, where Slip pushes her shuddering body down onto traffic’s eager hand. These sex scenes exhibit affirmative corporeal aesthetics, and an ethos of the body that is ‘deeply positive’, to repeat Bakhtin’s words, as well as progressive. McGregor does not simply represent highly sexualised bodies in a neutral way, she represents them as natural and affirmative. In order to read these scenes in the positive way that McGregor intends them it is helpful to understand the pro-sex ethos that informs *The Chemical Palace*. Even in the most extreme actions and poses, with their edges violently penetrated and insides oozing forth, these bodies are beautiful – grotesquely beautiful.

In her analysis of the grotesque in Southern American literature, particularly in the work of Carson McCullers, Sarah Gleeson-White (2001) also rails against what she sees as a common misapplication of Bakhtin’s theory of the grotesque (109). Gleeson-White is disparaging of the way many critics speak about the grotesque in Southern literatures, claiming that they generally equate it simplistically with ‘the gothic and the strange’ (109). Her description of the bodily element in Bakhtin is so illuminating that it is worth quoting in full:

Bakhtin’s construction of the grotesque likewise emphasizes corporeality, more specifically, corporeal contortion. In Bakhtin’s account, the body is a body of excess, and so it queries borders and neat categories. Perhaps most importantly, it is a body in flux, in a constant process of reformation and re-emergence: it is becoming. Strictly opposed to the aesthetics of the grotesque is the classic body and its accompanying poetics of closure, coherence, and stasis. The grotesque then, by its very nature, unnerves the world of classic identity and knowledge, for it tests the very limits of the body and thus of being. Crucially, Bakhtin celebrates this strange body for it is a site of production: ‘the grotesque ... discloses the potentiality of an entirely different world, of another order, another way of life’ (*Rabelais* 48). This is the invigorating aspect of the Bakhtinian grotesque: it is transgressive because it challenges normative forms of

representation and behaviour; it disturbs because it loves the object and will not rest; it is always in a state of becoming. The carnivalesque grotesque, then, is a strategy of resistance. (109)

Both the performative dressed up bodies and the object sexualised bodies in *chemical palace* are positive sites of production. What is being produced ranges from individuals' senses of self, to their connections with others, and finally, to communities and scenes (such as the BDSM community). Just like the stage and the dance floor, another person's body is a playground in which various selves may frolic.

Gleeson-White's insistence on the grotesque body as a site of production, and Kristeva's concept of the object – always searching, 'a tireless builder' (8) – function well together. The two concepts may be plugged into the object scenes and images in *chemical palace* to help the reader understand the author's purpose in exposing them. Even those who recoil from these highly-sexualised images may gain an appreciation for McGregor's sophisticated representation of traffic's object straying – her journeys away from and towards herself. If contemporary readers can comprehend beauty in child-birth – a violent, painful and certainly object process – then perhaps it not too much to expect them to grasp the vitality and exquisiteness of McGregor's extreme sexual imagery. We can appreciate that McGregor's inclusion of these graphic sex scenes is not a gratuitous homage to promiscuity, or a literary 'hook' to lure those seeking cheap titillation. The arched back, the stretched open mouth, the sweat trickling between breasts, the vaginal 'cave' convulsing, and the body melting and surrendering its fluids are integral to the novel's carnivalesque ethos and its project as a minor literature. They are also some of the most beautiful and profound images in the novel, for the 'object is edged with sublime' (Kristeva 11).

McGregor's novel is useful as a record of the scene it represents, but it is also valuable as a literary representation of the grotesque and grotesque camp. Her narrative demonstrates how the grotesque is creatively utilised in the carnivalesque nightclub space through costume and performance, themes and aesthetics. Through employing analytical judgments from Kristeva and Gleeson-White, we have observed how the public expression and exploration of these ambivalences has allowed radical queer communities to 'banish their demons', and understand, deconstruct and re-construct their fears, dreams and desires. The application of grotesque images of the body empowers the scene's queer participants and manifests a unique and rich performance culture. I have also sought to justify McGregor's inclusion of numerous graphic sex scenes, which function in the novel to constitute resurrection, alive-ness, the ambivalent straying (travelling, building) that can be seen as a productive expression of the object, and the critical positive bodily principle. In any manifestation, grotesque images are always life-affirming. Camp, extreme or political grotesque symbols (in all cases) symbolise life (being alive) and rebirth; a creative new beginning. Now we may fully grasp the connection between sex and dancing. Dance floor practices, often inspired by drugs, are an essential component of the process of re-enchantment. The performances, costumes and spectacle all contribute to the experience, which inspires transcendence. The connection between dancing, drug use and sex is the sublime: all are roads to the sublime which begin with the mundane. Kristeva places the object on the same trajectory as the sublime, saying:

For the sublime has no object either. When the starry sky, a vista of open seas or a stained glass window shedding purple beams fascinates me, there is a cluster of meaning, of colours, of words, of caresses, there are light touches, scents, sighs, cadences that arise, shroud me, carry me away, and sweep me beyond the things that I see, hear, or think. The 'sublime' object dissolves in the raptures of a bottomless

memory, which, from stopping point to stopping point, remembrance to remembrance, love to love, transfers that object to the refulgent point of the dazzlement in which I stray in order to be. (12)

Intimately connected to the sublime is transcendence and spirituality. McGregor's narrative insists that fucking, dancing and experimenting with drugs are all just different paths to the same destination. Her characters seek to transcend the everyday, and yet this transcendence does not lead upwards (towards 'heaven'), it leads down – to the grotesque and beautiful body, to the eternal strength and mortality of humanity, and to the complex banality of human interaction. This is the power of the grotesque.

6. A minor literature

I've never been very interested in theorizing about my sexuality, let alone being a queer spokesperson. My themes are the age-old ones of sex and death, family and friendship, not lesbianism or any other sexuality. (McGregor, 'Lesbian' 34)

In 1996 McGregor was asked to contribute to *Meanjin's* first queer edition, *Australia Queer* (55.1). In her illuminating article, 'I am not a lesbian', she expresses her frustration with regularly being labelled a 'lesbian writer' (31). McGregor's article presents a lament for the seemingly unavoidable double-bind in which queer literatures often languish. This double-bind is encapsulated in the way these literatures are talked about and how they are categorised for marketing purposes. Explaining the relatively low 'buzz' around the release of her second book, *Suck My Toes*, McGregor bemoans the fact that many readers/reviewers are quick to refer to the short story collection as a 'lesbian book' (31). While McGregor envisions *Suck My Toes* as a collection that portrays universal themes of 'sex and death, family and friendship' (34), she is regretfully aware that 'people's need for certainty leads to a label for each writer, each book' (33). The very existence of *Meanjin's* queer edition supports her assertion that people have an inescapable tendency to box things together and label them. The application of labels based on sexual preference is a constant problematic for queer people generally, not just producers of culture. In her analysis of lesbian bathhouses in the USA, Corie Hammers discusses the love-hate relationship that the queer women who frequent these sex-on-premises venues have with labels:

When it came to my interviewees, over half of the respondents used several descriptors to identify themselves: some of these include 'queer boi dyke', 'dyke that sucks sock', 'bi-boi', and 'genderqueer bi-fag'. That over half the respondents used numerous words to describe themselves highlights the simultaneous complexity of subjectivities, and the very limitations and constraints of identity categories themselves. For instance, many interviewees expressed a love-hate relationship with categories when attempting to describe 'who they are'. In utilizing multiple descriptors, individuals tried to circumvent the limitations of language, while personalizing the categories that are available to convey their own individuality. (149)

For McGregor, and many of her characters, the label 'lesbian' is woefully inadequate and represents a red herring, throwing readers off the scent of the central themes in her writing. Moreover, as McGregor points out, this label does not usually benefit lesbian authors in a material sense, as 'lesbian books' tend to sell poorly ('Lesbian' 35). Regardless of the author's intention, books with gay characters are usually characterised as 'gay books'. Monique Wittig's 1980 essay, 'The Point of View: Universal or Particular?' struggles with this notion:

Writing a text which has homosexuality among its themes is a gamble. It is taking the risk that at every turn the formal element which is the theme will overdetermine the meaning, monopolize the whole meaning, against the intension of the author who wants above all to create a literary work. Thus the text which adopts such a theme sees one of its parts taken for the whole ... (62)

Keenly aware of this tendency, McGregor has developed a complex, even troubled relationship to the question of sexuality in her books, yet queerness is an essential element in *chemical palace*, and cannot be ignored. The challenge for readers and critics is to put the theme of queer sexualities into proper perspective, while still comprehending the role of the novel as a minor text.

What is it that makes McGregor's third book an example of minor literature, as Davidson suggests? I hesitate to proffer the argument that queers are always writing in a heterosexist language – the language of the straight world – as this is a simplification of a far more complex set of processes, relations and language ownership. While there are heteronormative features in the English language, it is also the language of McGregor's upbringing and one she clearly adores. McGregor is not an author writing in a stranger's language, but *chemical palace* is a text with many minor characteristics. In considering the applicability of the 'minor literature' label, it is beneficial to note that the text has minor subject matter. As Wittig suggests, in queer texts it is not so much the way language is used by the author that minoritises their writing, as their choice to include images that openly express or suggest unorthodox sexual habits and concerns (62). Gay, lesbian and queer sexual activity in print still draws varied responses from readers: McGregor points to the thinly-veiled 'homodistaste' of Joanna Mendelsohn's review of *The Folding Star* by Alan Hollinghurst, in which she complains *repeatedly* about being exposed to 'gay sex' in 'excruciating detail' ('Lesbian' 37). This distaste may be a lot more socially-acceptable than outright disgust (or blatant homophobia), but it is just as alienating to the queer author and potentially damaging to the critical regard of his or her book. Reviews I have discussed demonstrate that this undercurrent of prejudice has translated into short-sighted and superficial critiques of McGregor's novel, which no doubt have an impact on (some) peoples' decision about whether or not to read the book. In an effort to explain this xenophobia, McGregor constructs sexuality as a kind of ethnicity. She says: 'Queers are foreigners in every country. I will rarely be called an Australian writer in Australia but I will be called a lesbian writer everywhere' (32). Some reviewers of *chemical palace* participate in an exoticisation of McGregor's writing which ultimately leads them to overlook the more formal features. Wittig expounds:

Minority authors are menaced by the meaning even while they are engaged in formal experimentation: what for them is only a theme in their work, a formal element, imposes itself as meaning *only*, for straight readers. (66, original emphasis)

When the queerness, drug use and needle-play portrayed in the novel are allowed to eclipse all else the fact that McGregor's main themes are in fact relatively traditional goes unnoticed, and the contribution the book makes to Australian literary tradition (particularly writings about Sydney) is left unacknowledged. Deleuze and Guattari claim that the author of minor literature is a 'stranger *within* his own language' (*Minor* 26, original emphasis). It could be argued, then, that the queer author is a stranger within his or her own *culture*. Just as the colour of someone's skin may blind the viewer to the unique personality of the man or woman beneath it, the existence of queer sex acts in a novel seems to blind some readers to the literary qualities of the text. Eagan's review provides a prime example: after suggesting that the novel is about the 'disease of a subculture steeped in hedonism, narcissism, and aimlessness', Eagan criticises the narrative as by focussing on sex and sexuality:

The novel's seemingly endless cast of characters includes James Holmes, a DJ also known as Mr. Hyde; traffic and Billy, a dysfunctional lesbian couple; Sailor, a junkie who has an affair with traffic; and the Professor, another drug addict and an aficionado of anonymous sex. Lacking an overall plot, the novel relies on the varied sexual couplings of the characters and the openings and closings of party venues to denote the passing years. (161-162)

It is this tendency to make multiple references to sex and people's sexualities that McGregor finds wearying.

McGregor's appeal against being labelled a 'lesbian author' is not a demand that readers ignore or deny the queerness in her texts: the answer to the problem of exoticisation is

not a homogenisation of queer writing. McGregor is aware that sexuality plays a pivotal role in her narratives, but also says:

Still, I get sick of my sexuality being mentioned in the context of my writing in the same way my friends with funny surnames get sick of being asked about their ancestry. It's not always relevant and to me it's stating the obvious. I'm sure Jessica Anderson wouldn't feel comfortable with the label 'straight writer'; I'm not sure Tracey Moffatt is always comfortable with the label 'Aboriginal artist'. ('Lesbian' 33)

The labels applied to producers of culture from minority groups are problematic because they limit the way we read/view the texts they produce. To varying degrees, depending on the audience, these labels produce preconceptions, often preventing sophisticated and multilayered readings of minority texts. McGregor acknowledges that her subject matter is minor – alternative, different, etc – but she implores the reader (particularly the educated reader and critic) to understand that the queer objects, activities and relationships she portrays represent that which is banal and everyday to those who live their lives in that context (35). When we appreciate and accept this fact, the queer activities and objects in the text can resume their proper place as plot devices, images and symbols, rather than being mistaken for major themes of the text. To put it simply, sexual preference is *not* a primary theme of *chemical palace*, and the politics of BDSM and alternative sexualities are not major themes either. Queerness and radical sexuality are simply components of the identities and lifestyles of the characters – the backdrop to the action. Furthermore, scenes such as the one where traffic sleeps with Matthias (275) demonstrate that sexuality is not fixed or predictable in the book. Essentially, McGregor's writing is not 'about' sexuality:

I've never been very interested in theorizing about my sexuality, let alone being a queer spokesperson. My themes are the age-old ones of sex and death, family and friendship, not lesbianism or any other sexuality. ('Lesbian' 34)

In creating a record of the radical queer nightclub scene of the 1990s, McGregor has unwittingly written a manifesto, but in it, queerness is not about who sleeps with who, it's about attitudes, beliefs and choices. McGregor makes the pertinent argument that 'one person's edge is another person's centre' ('Lesbian' 33). This simple but profound philosophical concept appears to elude many reviewers who write about radical, sex-positive queer texts. Wittig explains that texts by minority authors are dismissed unless they 'succeed in making the minority point of view universal' (64), but is this a reasonable expectation to place upon a novelist? Even though *chemical palace* is not a book in which gay or lesbian sexuality is a 'theme' in the traditional sense, it *is* a book about people who sit on the margins of an already marginalised community, and in that sense, *chemical palace* is a minor text, so Deleuze and Guattari's essential characteristics of 'minor literature' apply:

The three characteristics of a minor literature are the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and collective assemblage of enunciation. (*Minor* 18)

Davidson identifies the radical queer dance party scene as a 'microculture to emphasise its positioning as an oppositional and marginalised fraction within the already marginalised gay and lesbian urban scene' (141). Radical queer culture is by its nature marginal, and it does not seek to be otherwise. It is not 'on the outside looking in', wanting to be part of the mainstream. Radical queer dance party culture just wants to be allowed to exist; it *fight*s for its existence. Unlike the punk subculture, radical queer culture is not an angry reaction against mainstream culture, it interweaves through it and alongside it, with its members inhabiting numerous worlds. What's more, radical queer cultural production thrives upon critiquing and parodying mainstream cultures past and present.

While not disavowing politics, McGregor is conscious of a benefit in disassociating herself from a dominant image of 'angry', deeply-politicised lesbian fiction. While this image certainly represents a homophobic stereotype, it is also perpetuated by some within the queer community. McGregor resents the fact that lesbians are somehow expected to have 'greater political obligations than the general population', an attitude she identifies in both mainstream and gay audiences, referring to questions she has been asked about her 'obligations as a lesbian author' in interviews (34). It is common to read discussions and reviews of queer literatures that make sweeping imperative statements as to what queer literature 'must do', or 'should not do'. Michael Cart (2005) expresses this attitude in painfully didactic language:

For starters, we need more books featuring characters of color [sic], more bisexual and transgender characters, and more characters with same-sex parents. The books need to do a better job, too, of acknowledging that children are now grappling with their sexual identity at a younger age than in the past, and that gays and lesbians do not live on a separate planet. (1356)

Surely this is too much to ask of any cohort of fiction writers? Not to mention the fact that trying to live up to these kinds of demands/limitations/prescriptions would quash creativity and individuality in queer literatures. McGregor argues that readers should primarily consider her writing through literary conventions and standards, rather than as a queer or lesbian book, with 'political' aims. Exposing the exoticisation of queer characters and sex-radical acts in her writing, McGregor complains that it blinds readers to the literary qualities of her work. She says:

There's plenty of banality, sparkling lesbian desire and beauty in *Suck* for the reader not blinded by orthodox notions of what is everyday and what is exotic. ('Lesbian' 35)

She also cites examples of critics who have been so fixated by the sex, drugs and BDSM in her books that they overlook her use of natural symbolisms, her exploration of place, and the relationships she has thoughtfully and painstakingly fashioned (33-7). There is however, a resigned tone to McGregor's complaints in 'I am not a lesbian', rather than a tone of anger or righteousness. It is hard to be angry about the fact that people are driven by their own beliefs and world-views. It is not an easy task to overcome our prejudices, and McGregor laments this with maturity. Rather than describing short-sighted critiques of her writing as outrageous, prejudiced or even homophobic, she simply calls them 'disappointing' (35). The disappointment McGregor felt at the definitive and premature labelling of *Suck my Toes* foregrounds her reaction to the later reception of *chemical palace*; a book with even more complex themes and more of a role to play in representing a community close to McGregor's heart. In order to do this complex text justice, readers must be able to evaluate the text as a radical queer community book, and *also* as an example of Australian fiction dealing largely with the theme of place (Sydney). To ignore either side of this equation is to reduce the text in a way that is, to use McGregor's term, disappointing. To illuminate this paradoxical discussion, it is useful to begin by interrogating what is meant by 'minor fiction', and how it applies to *chemical palace*.

Davidson introduces this approach to *chemical palace* by suggesting that the novel is a 'minor text' and the radical queer scene is a 'microculture' ('Minor' 141). He proposes that the scene represented is on the margins of an already marginalised community and is thus a microculture. He then explicates that the novel 'speaks on behalf of a neglected collectivity' by representing the ethos, history and practices of resistance that characterise the scene and, given that it represents unheard or neglected voices and subjectivities, the novel has a 'transfigurative' potential inline with the potentials that Deleuze and Guattari attribute to

minor fiction generally (143). Academics offer diverse interpretations of what constitutes ‘minor’ in literature, but a typical interpretation positions the minor as outside of, or opposed to the standard or majority. For example, in ‘Remembering the Body Without Organs: towards a minor philosophy’, Jason Demers (2006) claims that ‘the minor mode is only allowed to exist in *relation* to the majority’ (158, original emphasis). Demers elucidates the energetic potentialities of minor literatures, arguing that they always refuse ‘to be pinned down by predisposition’, and that ‘a minor performance whisks away the script’ (158). This kind of enthusiastic and abstract language is always connected to descriptions of the minor. Demers goes on to explain that, according to Deleuze and Guattari, the minor does not aim to become major, or to ‘install a new constant’ – in fact, by definition the minor is ‘always in flux’ (158). This perspective assists us to appreciate the complex positionings of *chemical palace* and of McGregor as an author, as we are able to comprehend that what is minor in one context may be major in another. To examine the claim that *chemical palace* is an example of minor literature, we must further interrogate Deleuze and Guattari’s three seminal characteristics: ‘the deterritorialization of language’, the ‘connection of the individual to a political immediacy’, and the ‘collective assemblage of enunciation’ (*Minor* 18).

Deterritorialization

The first characteristic, the deterritorialization of language, is open to diverse interpretations. It loosely refers to a breaking, misusing or re-energising of language to create alternative literary products. Demers says:

In the minor mode, contents free themselves from both their form (becoming unformed matter) and from the expressions (signifiers) which formalized them. (162)

It is suggested that by redefining the way language can be used, and by expressing unknown and uncharted subjects, minor texts break form, even becoming *formless*; ‘a pure intensity of matter’ (Demers 162). The minor text is said to pre-exist ‘conceptualization’, and therefore to be ‘pure expression’ (Demers 162; Deleuze and Guattari *Minor* 19). Describing this process, Deleuze and Guattari conjure images of experimental sub-cultural texts (often written by members of minority groups) that offer hints of literary brilliance amid strikingly naïve and ultimately unsuccessful narrative experiments (*Minor* 26). In exactly what sense these narrative experiments are unsuccessful is unclear, but the symbolism of reaching and failing is unmistakable. Deleuze and Guattari’s descriptions also suggest that a kind of naïve brilliance characterises minor texts:

And it always ends like that, language’s lines of escape: silence, the interrupted, the interminable, or even worse. But until that point, what a crazy creation, what a writing machine! (*Minor* 26)

There is an inescapable romanticism in Deleuze and Guattari’s claims about the literary potentials of minor text, and there is unbridled excitement for an ephemeral sense of its revolutionary potential. This revolutionary potential is to be found in the form and content, which is intimately connected – one and the same – which Deleuze and Guattari claim always invokes a political immediacy, but it is also to be found in the rogue uses of language, symbolism and genre (*Minor* 19 and 26-7). The authors describe the employments of language in minor literature in a way that, ironically, recalls the bombastic usage of language in Mennipean satire:

Even when it is unique, a language remains a mixture, a *schizophrenic mélange*, a Harlequin costume in which very different functions of language and distinct centers of power are played out, blurring what can be said and what can’t be said; one function

will be played off against the other, all the degrees of territoriality and relative deterritorialization will be played out. (*Minor* 26, my emphasis)

The issue of ‘what can and can’t be said’ is crucial to understanding minor literature. Put simply; minor literature is non-mainstream literature. It generally expresses something that has not been said before, and in doing so must find new forms of expression, as the old ones are not sufficient to the task. I employ this crude, simplistic short-hand to demonstrate that from its very inception minor literature is minor – before it even becomes words on a page. It is minor literature because the author has a desire to represent the unrepresented – or that which has been negatively-, incorrectly-, simplistically-, stereotypically-, or under-represented in literature and other public spheres.

Returning to Demers, let us interrogate his understanding of Deleuze and Guattari’s concept that a minor literature is a literature in which ‘contents free themselves from both their form (becoming unformed matter) and from the expressions (signifiers) which formalized them’ (162). I do not dispute the claim that minor literatures present ‘a refusal to be guided by dominant forms’, but I am uncomfortable with the association of minor literatures with ‘pure’ expression – expression ‘without conceptualization’ (Demers 162). This idea is expressed definitively by Deleuze and Guattari, who claim that minor literature ‘begins by expressing itself and doesn’t conceptualize until afterward’ (*Minor* 28). But this belief – so tempting to accept, so *sexy* – actually simplifies the relationship between the minor writer and the major language and major literary traditions. Minor literatures are not always easily discernible from major, and, in McGregor’s case the two are entwined. Even if we put aside McGregor’s cultural, economic and ethnic identifications, *chemical palace* is peppered with references to major philosophers (Nietzsche) and writers (Ruth Park), alongside its minor intertextualities (such as song lyrics, flyers, etc). It is clear that McGregor has not rejected (nor is she located firmly outside of) Australian literary tradition; although her relationship to that tradition is problematised by issues to do with her sexuality and the perception of it by others. This complicates our use of the term ‘minor literature’ to describe *chemical palace*, particularly because minor literatures are said to arise in a ‘cramped space’ where there is little talent or tradition to guide the author (Deleuze and Guattari *Minor* 17).

Rather than suggesting that minor literature arises in a vacuum, representing pure expression, in analysing *chemical palace* it is more productive to say that minor literature borrows from what it knows, what is close by and what is available to it. Minor literature is not a pure or unformed expression, it is the bower of a bower bird, filled with shiny things taken and used in new ways. For the author of a minor fiction, this can include utilising inspiration from canonical literature, biblical references, pop-cultural jargon, Creole languages and or sub-cultural idiom to name just a few potential sources. Rather than unformed, minor literature – at least in the context of *chemical palace* – is formed from perhaps a wider, more complex set of influences than its major cousins, which work within a set of experiences and ideologies that are restricted by convention. While there is no doubt that the minor author’s practice of bricolage occurs in major literatures too, it tends to be more obvious in a minor literature, especially to readers not familiar with the culture or subculture that the text springs from. In other words, readers and critics notice the eccentric form of minor literature because it is unfamiliar, but that does not make it new or pure. What I am suggesting is that the deterritorializations inherent in minor literature are often a result of organic processes of representation, rather than self-conscious attempts to *re-imagine* literature and/or to break the dominant language. Frequently, the writer is using the linguistic and poetic devices available

to them (and most natural to them), and this creates a text which appears radical but is in fact just different.

I am not claiming that all minor texts are organic, natural and creatively unremarkable, nor am I saying that minor texts lack the ability to be revolutionary. However, there is a tendency of some critics to label texts that deal with minor subjects as automatically 'revolutionary', and this is not productive. I have insisted previously that the concept of *chemical place* as an example of Australian avant-garde or post-modern literature is problematic to say the least. I have demonstrated that the style is an outcome of McGregor's upbringing, literary preferences, and various social, political, aesthetic and academic contexts. The creativity is in the methods that she uses to adapt and blend different types of language to adequately express her previously un-represented subject matter. Davidson asserts that:

The formal risk-taking of *Chemical Palace* might be understood as a consequence of the novelty of its content: an attempt to find a means of expression for the intensities of the microcultural scene. ('Minor' 145)

Accepting this hypothesis of *chemical palace* allows us to appreciate that a book dealing with extreme and alternative subject matter can in fact exhibit conventional literary features. Davidson pronounces that *chemical palace* is 'hardly a well-made novel, its loose ends are several and it is unpunctuated by anything so climactic as the death of a character or the revelation of a secret', but he also asserts that it has the 'rudiments' of a conventional plot (143). McGregor's narrative is sometimes accomplished and sometimes naïve and, in terms of its use of language, the novel is innovative in parts and unremarkable in others, but not consistently radical. Deleuze and Guattari's descriptions of minor literature attribute to it a goal of escape, suggesting the minor author must deterritorialize the language of the oppressor in order to oppose her oppression:

To make use of the polylingualism of one's own language, to make a minor or intensive use of it, to oppose the oppressed quality of this language to its oppressive quality, to find points of nonculture or under-development, linguistic Third World zones by which a language can escape, an animal enters into things, an assemblage comes into play. (*Minor* 27)

There is a problematic romanticism in the authors' assertion that minor literature creates 'linguistic Third World zones', and this kind of abstract exclamation is not, I believe, beneficial to projects of minor literature. As well as claiming that minor literature should break with all tradition and convention, and be somehow totally new, Deleuze and Guattari elucidate what Davidson calls 'rather grandiose' (143) visions for the role of minor literature (19). Rather than making bold claims as to the revolutionary role of minor texts, critics might more fruitfully discuss the efficacy of representation; how well the minor subject can be understood and located within the text; or how well the text achieves its aim of finding a way to say the unsaid or unsayable. This is where McGregor excels in *chemical palace*. While it may not be a 'well-made novel' and does not exhibit a consistently revolutionary use of language or literary techniques, McGregor's novel excels in the following areas: capturing the 'vibe' and atmosphere of the radical queer dance party scene – particularly in the 1990s and in inner-city Sydney; representing neo-bohemian aesthetics and ideals through imaginative descriptions of costuming and performance; representing group dialogue in a scene-appropriate, organic and inventive way; writing about music with particular aplomb; and offering alternative and counter-balanced narratives of drug use. Furthermore, as Davidson writes, *chemical palace* 'posits microcultural practices as alternative social energies' (143). These are not small feats for a novel to achieve.

Reconciling her own experience of the scene with a desire to represent her subject matter in way that does it justice, McGregor has drawn on an incredibly diverse array of cultural and literary influences. These influences, many of whom are performers and artists in McGregor's immediate sphere, have contributed to the ingenuity and distinctiveness of the novel. Deleuze and Guattari proclaim that:

Expression [in a minor literature] must break form, encourage ruptures and new sproutings. When a form is broken, one must reconstruct the content that will necessarily be part of a rupture in the order of things. (*Minor* 28)

There is no doubt that *chemical palace* exhibits new sproutings in a literary *and* cultural sense, even if it does not cause a 'rupture in the order of things'. Once again, it is useful to turn to the question of the minor subject matter of the novel, as this is where we encounter the most dramatic ruptures and transgressions. McGregor's representations of sex, electronic music, and dancing in the club context, encourage readers to identify these activities as a path to transcendence. The writing itself, however, whilst compelling, is not consistently *transcendent*. Davidson offers this account of the subjects and methods in *chemical palace*:

The intensities of aesthetic expression, performance, dance, drugs and sexual practice central to the queer world as they described in the book offer what Deleuze and Guattari call 'lines of flight': transformative, albeit fugitive, departures from the normalising regimes of labour, consumption, and heteronormativity. (142)

While the novel is 'resolutely undramatic' (Davidson 143), somewhat naïve and creatively inconsistent, there is no doubt as to the efficacy of its message and its role as a memoir of the radical queer scene in the 1990s. McGregor's style is shaped by camp, kitsch and even beatnik idioms, which leads some reviewers to consider it 'dated', but the style is deliberately tongue-in-cheek, expressing the author's unique sense of humour and capturing the 'soul' of the scene as she imagines it. The self-deprecating attitude communicated in the novel's less sophisticated sections makes it a more authoritative and genuine record, and is in keeping with the moral perspective and ethos of the scene. Deleuze and Guattari's definition of minor literatures forgets to leave room for their humorous and unremarkable qualities, and these are often what render minor literature so refreshing.

The literature of minority writers may have aims both inside and outside of literary conventions and, in fulfilling those aims authors may need to pervert conventional literary standards. Deleuze and Guattari's definition of minor literature seems to imply that these literatures should make subverting the oppressing language their major aim:

Since the language is arid, make it vibrate with a new intensity. Oppose a purely intensive usage of language to all symbolic or even significant or simply signifying usages of it. Arrive at a perfect and unformed expression, a materially intense expression. (19)

I question the definitiveness of this approach. There is no reason why a minor author should not make use of language ways similar to a non-minor author, even if he or she is attempting to achieve different ends. For that matter, there is no reason why a minor author should not *also* aim for literary success, aesthetic symmetry and linguistic beauty in their work. While there are certainly naiveties in *chemical palace*, it is hardly a literarily-disadvantaged or pauperised text, and it certainly does not dispense with the 'intensive usage of language to all symbolic or even significant or simply signifying usages'. McGregor uses symbolism and metaphor like any other fiction writer, and in some ways of her own. Deleuze and Guattari's imperative for minor fiction seems like a kind of literary primitivism; a romanticisation of the writing of the oppressed, which they perceive should be more pure than that of the oppressor. The minor text is not antithetical to the major text; the distinction is fragile and the boundaries

are easily blurred. Furthermore, absolutely *no* literature is pure – it is all a wonderful mess of words.

Political immediacy

The second characteristic of a minor literature, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is ‘the connection of the individual to a political immediacy’ (18). The authors’ claim that it is impossible for minor authors *not* to write because their writing is necessary to create the collective consciousness of the minority they represent (16). Everything in a minor literature is political in their estimation because the minor author is always writing for and on behalf of an unrepresented minority which desperately desires to see itself represented, so ‘[minor] literature finds itself positively charged with the role and function of the collective’ (17). However, minor authors write for many reasons, and the compulsion to speak for their communities may not always be the most dominant. If we are to discuss minor text, we must acknowledge that much of what makes a text minor is in its reception. Is the minor author writing for their community, or are we as readers expecting them to? Is this a fair expectation? Are *all* writers writing for their community? For example, does a white middle-class Caucasian male novelist advocate for his ‘own kind’, or is advocacy only the domain of those from marginalised groups? The answer is exceeding complex and may be different depending on context, but there is no doubt that audiences expect women, queers, authors from ethnic minorities, etc, to advocate on behalf of their communities, and that these minor authors are expected to write more ‘political’ fiction. In truth, McGregor has no more responsibility to be political in her writing, or to represent her community, than Peter Carey. McGregor’s *chemical palace* is not a book written for the broader gay community, and it is certainly not a ‘lesbian book’, despite having lesbian and gay characters. The scene that the book represents is a radical cross-section of these communities. McGregor accepts *some* role for advocating on behalf of this microcultural grouping, but she also regularly stresses that the novel presents her subjective point of view only. While McGregor champions the radical queer scene in *chemical palace*, this is not the sole purpose of her novel (Davidson ‘Minor’ 148). As Davidson says, *chemical palace* is an ‘emphatic queering of the city’ (148), but readers should also be aware that McGregor’s politics are not entirely determined by her sexual preference. A queer author may bring a queer sensibility to their texts, and these texts may be of great importance to queer readers, but books by queer authors should also be appreciated for ‘language, its alchemical quality’ (McGregor ‘Lesbian’ 33).

Deleuze and Guattari state that the ‘cramped space [of minor literature] forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics’ (*Minor* 17). As well as being hyperbolic, this statement neglects the inevitable variations in readers’ reception of text. It could be argued that the reader makes these forced connections, especially the reader whose understanding of the minor subject matter is greatly limited. Such readers may immediately slot the narrative into the cramped space they associate with that subject. For example, if someone’s only understanding of gay men is as effeminate, ‘bitchy’ and fashion-obsessed, or as the semi-naked, sexualised figures in the Mardi Gras parade, they may well slot gay characters in a novel immediately into this cramped space. McGregor does not accept being consigned to a cramped space of gay and lesbian literature, nor does she accept any pressure to carry the additional weight of expectation that her work must speak for lesbian or gay communities. If you asked McGregor ‘is *chemical palace* a gay and lesbian book?’ she would probably roll her eyes, but ask her ‘is it is a book for radical queer Sydney?’ and she may well approve.

When reading any minority literature we must be sensitive to the multiplicity of opinion and allegiance within communities, as well as the contradictory and multifarious facets of individual writers. When Rozelle Writers' Centre held its first 'QueerLit Conference' in 1993, bringing gay, lesbian, bisexual and queer authors together to discuss the challenges facing them, a common theme kept emerging: poet Margaret Bradstock (1993) calls it the 'damned if you do/damned if you don't syndrome' (2). In her conference paper, Bradstock explains that queer authors face an impossible choice. If she writes about anything queer – politics, sex, her same-gender partner – she is labelled 'a gay poet, not a poet', and her work is 'relegated to the margins' (1). Alternatively, if she writes poetry 'about kids and dogs, interactions with the landscape, a general political consciousness perhaps', gay and lesbian readers are disappointed (2). Those with little experience of queer communities may not realise the vast cultural gaps between sub-sets within them, or that among gays, lesbian and queers exists the same racial and cultural diversity found in society more broadly. In order to avoid homogenising queer writers, we must be conscious not to elevate their sexuality. It is reasonable for an author to expect to be assessed as both queer *and* a woman, or, indeed, as both queer *and* a Sydney-sider. Bradstock expresses the paradoxical position of queer authors skilfully:

Any poem connected with my female partner is, presumably, a lesbian poem, whether its subject matter is childbirth, fixing the house, or passion of a different calibre. But they are also, first and foremost, poetry. ... However, if you strive for universality (which I do), or are interested in universality (which I am), you may fall between two stools. In general, lesbians, for example, want to hear and read poetry that reflects their own lifestyles – because there's a dearth of that. If you don't provide that reflection, you've lost your audience. The wider world, on the other hand, finds it difficult to recognise our universality as our universality. They don't or won't make the necessary transference, which I know I, as a reader, am always prepared to make. (2)

I am not able to explore in depth here why sexuality so often trumps all other categories, or why it immediately creates the cramped space in the minds of some readers in which texts like *Suck My Toes* are left to suffocate, but I can suggest a solution to Bradstock's 'damned if you do/damned if you don't syndrome', which still too often beleaguers queer writing in 2010. In reading we must open up cramped spaces and resist labelling narrative; we must grant the minor author the right to 'have her cake and eat it too'; and we must 'walk the tightrope' (Deleuze and Guattari *Minor* 19) by assessing books simultaneously according to multiple criteria. Nothing else is good enough.

'Walking the tightrope', McGregor refuses to relinquish her role as a queer author or to embrace it completely. Writing the story of an ostensibly queer community, she also reminds us that for her:

Worlds overlap, and I try to travel as many as possible in order to vary my perspectives and enrich my life. The reader, ideally, will travel with me and my characters. I am interested in individuals and their emotions and the influence of social worlds and landscapes on the interior worlds of those individuals. Above all, I'm interested in language, its alchemical quality. ('Lesbian' 32-3)

The novel tells a tale of friendships dissolving as priorities change and the scene that binds them comes under threat. Davidson claims that 'in recording the queer scene, then, the novel simultaneously memorialises it' (142). While there's an elegiac tone to the novel, McGregor in fact resists the tendency to memorialise the scene completely. This would have been an easier path to creating an effective narrative, providing dramatic climax and closure that the

novel lacks. Instead McGregor insists that there is ‘always something happening’ (38) and ends the novel in a very open-ended way. McGregor walks the tightrope between speaking for herself, and speaking for the community, as she knows that just as one person leaves the scene, another person is discovering it for the first time. While *chemical palace* depicts a general movement away from the scene, mourning the decrease in radical performance after the early 2000s, McGregor knows that the ethos and aesthetics of radical queer culture are being taken-up by a new generation of young queers dissatisfied with the mainstream. So, the novel can be read as a manifesto for a continuing radical queer microculture, just as it can be read as an elegy. In *chemical palace*, the political immediacy that Deleuze and Guattari associate with all minor literature is better understood as political *awareness* and a dedication to speaking out about the changes and injustices that threaten radical queer culture.

Collective assemblage

Deleuze and Guattari’s third characteristic of minor literature, the collective assemblage of enunciation, is of the utmost relevance to *chemical palace*. Discussing narration in Kafka’s writing, Deleuze and Guattari say: ‘The letter K no longer designates a narrator or a character but an assemblage that becomes all the more machine-like’ (*Minor* 18). The collective assemblage of enunciation is perhaps the most complex characteristic of the minor texts according to Deleuze and Guattari. This characteristic challenges the very idea of fictional text as the creation of an individual who is telling the stories of individual characters. In the minor text, the collective takes precedence over what is singular or individual – nothing is owned by one, and everything is owned by all. In this way, the story is not told by one, but all, and is not about one, but many. Deleuze and Guattari observe this tendency in Kafka’s confusion and disruption of the roles of narrator and protagonist (18). When there is an untold story to be conveyed about a people or community, it seems natural to dispense with the unrelentingly individualising practice of speaking through an omnipotent narrator, or a singular first-person character voice. We see this in *chemical palace*, where the narration regularly switches from one character to another, then into a third-person objective narrator that is not objective at all. The sensation in the novel is that this multiplicity of voices is telling one story – a collective assemblage of enunciation. A kind of schizophrenic consistency is produced in the novel despite the fact that no single character’s voice dominates (yes, traffic is arguably the main character, but her *voice* is not dominant). The voices of numerous characters tell a multitude of individual stories, which interweave to construct a portrait of radical queer life in inner-city Sydney.

I have discussed the relationship of the text to collectivity and community, but Deleuze and Guattari’s construction provides a framework for understanding how the collective assemblage *functions* in fiction, and why it is a feature common to minor literatures. While *chemical palace* presents characters, they are sometimes incomplete, their edges are blurred, and their individuality often denied. McGregor’s text is semi-autobiographical but presents the memoir of a group of people, rather than one, and so voices blur in the same way that drugs are shared and bodies melt into each other like camembert left in the sun (*chemical* 200). Deleuze and Guattari see the collective assemblage of enunciation as a vehicle for telling ‘the people’s story’, claiming that in order to construct a narrative that conveys ‘the people’s message’, a writer must pervert the categories of ‘author’ and ‘subject’ (*Minor* 18). The minor enunciation does not appear to stem from one source, it does not always convey a coherent message, and it usually features a multiplicity of styles and tones. This is achieved by

chemical palace, which is like two books in one; with the personal stories of traffic and Slip interweaving the collective tales of the group and scene.

On a philosophical level, we can see beyond the idea of text-as-collective-assemblage and see it as the beginning of a conversation – an ‘utterance’. Perhaps not even the beginning, but a component part of a number of existing conversations that McGregor felt compelled to contribute to. Demers understands Deleuze and Guattari’s minor literature in precisely this way:

To understand language as it is bound by a single utterance (each synchronic set based upon a single text from a moment in the past) is a passive understanding: we cannot stand under the auspices of a single utterance, but must, on the contrary, understand that every utterance is a response that itself proposes a response. (160)

This apparently simple concept has complex ramifications for literary analysis. Deleuze and Guattari assert that literature, like all forms of language, is dialogic and subjective, not static and objective. Demers reminds us of Deleuze and Guattari’s insistence that they are not ‘even trying to interpret’ the text of Kafka; that they are instead connecting with it, and plugging it into various contextual machines (160). According to Demers, ‘systemization’, and the attempt to interpret text, renders living language ‘dead’ (160), and destroys ‘a body that is built of ‘becoming’ (Demers 160; Deleuze and Guattari 17-19). This argument supports a less prescriptive approach to fiction, in which text is seen to contribute to ongoing conversations. According to this approach, *chemical palace* is seen as a collective assemblage because it invites and continues a dialogue with the community it represents. The book plugs into many important, communal machines: queer machines; lesbian machines; Australian Literary and historical machines; drug use machines, etc. This is true of all novels, but more obvious in some. On the final pages of *chemical palace*, the words ‘Have fun, keep going keep creating’ are strewn passionately across the paper, escaping the frame of the book. This brings language into life, birthing McGregor’s purport into the readers’ hands and creating an interface between the reader and what is essentially an inanimate object. Demers refers to this kind of attempt to communicate through text as ‘language as an *interconnected social becoming*’ (161, original emphasis). McGregor’s ‘cry out’ to the world, represented through this and the other hypertextual and interpolative features of the novel, is everything Deleuze and Guattari propose a minor literature should be. However, these extrusions are located in the context of a sometimes conservative novel; a novel that also subscribes to traditional uses of symbol and subject. This is another paradox of queer literatures.

The construal of literary text as a ‘cry out’ to the world reopens questions of identity and queerness. Even when we consciously reject the tendency to view the author through a lens coloured by sexual orientation, issues of representation and queer voice still arise and deserve critical attention. In her analysis of two queer British historical novels – *Tipping the Velvet* by Sarah Waters and *Misfortune* by Wesley Stace – Emily Jeremiah (2007) proposes an innovative tactic for investigating the relationship between an author and her community. Jeremiah suggests that the tendency of postmodern theorists to promote ‘plurality and dissonance’ over ‘community and consensus’ has led to a critical neglect of the construction of communities in fiction, and the complex relationships of authors to these imaginary spaces (131). She does not hesitate to contend that queer readers are seeking to make meaningful connections with fiction, arguing that it ‘deals with ‘imaginary others’ and can be seen to encourage the development of connectedness’ (131). Interestingly, Jeremiah determines that these two texts represent a new kind of postmodern queer writing, in which representations of sexuality are informed by Butler’s notion of performativity *concurrent* with an ethos of

'community and care' (132). Rather than perceiving individuality and collectivity as opposing forces, or pitting tradition against innovation, Jeremiah argues that these texts combine the following (frequently opposed) concerns: 'history'; 'the novel itself'; 'queerness', and; 'collectivity' (132). These novels represent postmodern, self-reflexive queer fiction that also demonstrates a commitment to empowering queer communities through creating queer historiographies – inserting queer *into* history (Jeremiah 133). This necessitates a utilisation and re-working of types and stereotypes, such as the butch/femme dynamic in *Tipping the Velvet*. Jeremiah argues that the semi-traditional literary forms (the picaresque novel, historical novel and *Bildungsroman*) utilised by these authors offer a vehicle for breaking and re-making queer stereotypes (132). Trading on the familiarity and accessibility of popular historical narrative, Waters invests her novel with the power and authority of tradition – something often unavailable to queer fictions. In doing so, she walks the tightrope between subscribing to conservatism by pandering to fashion, and creating a radical narrative which definitively queers the past (133). Choosing to queer a relatively traditional narrative form, Waters also queers lesbian stereotypes, particularly those that construct lesbians and straight women as natural opposites, and those that consign 'lesbianism to a space outside (the dominant) culture' (Jeremiah 137). Just as they are in *chemical palace*, genre, stereotype and identities are presented in a multifarious manner in these novels, and narrative voices are themselves queered in order to facilitate a direct connection with the (usually) queer reader. Revealing that 'authorial authority is, then, illusionary, and 'authorship' a contested term' (140), Jeremiah says:

Misfortune is also concerned with narration; and it also offers a Butlerian challenge to authorship. The opening of the novel is narrated in the third person, as if by an omniscient narrator. But a first-person narrator breaks in on page seventy-one, to reveal that the baby being described is in fact him. The next section begins: 'Me. You know who I am' (Stace 2005:75). The reader is thus apparently addressed (the 'you' in question, we later learn, is the narrator's son) and the illusion of objectivity and distance is shattered. (140-1)

By performing traditional authorship only to break its rules and conventions, these authors assert a collective voice, writing for their chosen community as well as for themselves: Jeremiah says that in the two texts identity 'is relational and communal' (142).

Jeremiah's analysis of Waters and Stace provides a frame for seeing that the collective assemblage of enunciation can co-exist with traditional narrative and generic forms, and that queer writing is always both individual *and* collective:

Narration, according to this view, is a matter of risky trust: a fragile, partial, temporary – but potentially transformative – consensus between self and other. (142)

McGregor took a chance in publishing *chemical palace* that all queer writers take to some extent: the chance that her 'invitation to the world' would be rejected, misunderstood, misused, or ignored. In publishing such a novel, the author demonstrated a daring trust – the same 'fragile, partial, temporary – but potentially transformative' trust that Jeremiah attributes to Waters and Stace. Without this 'leap of faith' queer literatures would not be possible, or else would be confined to a queer readership (even more than they already are). If we are to read queer literatures with a sophisticated eye, we must evaluate their minor and non-minor parts simultaneously.

7. Nostalgia: is The Chemical Palace a ruin?

There comes a time towards the end of every dance party, when the world grows light and people's limbs seem to float in some kind of dream sequence. Splinters of sun squeeze through blackened entrances, and as the dance floor thins out, the awkward, the shy, the unfashionable and the uncoordinated gain confidence and just dance, unselfconsciously. Not in the tight, practised steps of dedicated clubbers, but free, loose-limbed moves. Twisting, whirling, turning, looking up towards the DJ, grinning. It's a gentler, more peaceful mood. (Baird 37)

A significant element of McGregor's novel I have not yet discussed is its focus on death, endings and change, and its saturation with nostalgia. I speak of these two features as one intentionally because they are so intimately linked in the text. HIV/AIDS is one of the first themes to appear in the narrative, and the spectres of death and illness permeate the characters' lives throughout. However, traditional understandings of bereavement and mourning are not sufficient for analysing how queer communities deal with death, especially in relation to HIV/AIDS. The realities of queer community alter perceptions of death in gay and lesbian scenes and communal approaches to HIV-related mortality inform the author's presentation of these issues in *chemical palace*. The work of Melissa F. Zeiger (1997) on AIDS elegies, in conjunction with Peter Sacks' (1985) definitions of elegy, provides a frame through which to view mortality and grief in *chemical palace*. Any discussion of death in *chemical palace* necessitates an analysis of the related themes of change (social, political and geographic) and sexuality, as well as inspiring an investigation into nostalgia: its expressions, its role in the narrative, and its effects. Reviewers of *chemical palace* have rightly identified that the text displays a poignant nostalgia inspired by the perceived demise of radical queer dance party culture (in its 1990s form) (Ley para. 5; Hughes 34; Durber para. 4). The work of Svetlana Boym, Dubravka Ugresic, and others, illuminates my analysis of nostalgia as in McGregor's novel. Ultimately, I will seek to answer the question 'is The Chemical Palace a ruin?', considering reasons for the declining vibrancy of the radical queer dance party scene in the 2000s, and documenting contemporary manifestations of radical queer culture.

AIDS and elegy

If sub-cultures are diminishing, at least McGregor breathes life into the world of prose with this distinctive and distinguished novel. During its pages I thought more than once of Dransfield, with the odd combination of freshness and world weariness. I hope McGregor follows the advice in the last words of her book: 'Have fun, keep going ... keep creating.' (Hughes 34)

Hughes wisely recognises McGregor's 'odd combination of freshness and world weariness' as a significant strength in her writing. The second half of the novel documents the increasing decline of the lifestyle of McGregor's characters, as the warehouse is sold-off, the group is dispersed, and Sydney's nightlife becomes increasingly commercialised and regulated. McGregor's interest in this process prompts me to consider the novel in relation to another literary genre; elegy. Sections of *chemical palace* contain tropes common to elegy, especially AIDS elegies. Zeiger identifies the AIDS elegy as 'both a new historically situated genre and an extensive refiguring of traditional elegiac motifs' (107). The genre of elegy is one of the oldest in literature but its conventions are dramatically reconfigured in the context of homosexual relationships, and its forms are altered to accommodate the communal horror of

the AIDS crisis. 'Elegy' is a term traditionally applied to poetry that honours, mourns and celebrates the dead. Peter Sacks' work on English elegies represents perhaps the most detailed exploration of the form. Zeiger suggests, however, that queer manifestations require viewing through a revised framework. Sacks sees the elegy as an example of 'poetic imagination operat[ing] most powerfully within the spaces of absence or dislocation', and his thesis asserts that in elegy the writer interacts with language to give 'presence to a strongly felt absence' (xi). In any manifestation (including queer), elegy is a uniquely *intense* literary expression and one that Sacks understands as a process (work); specifically as 'a working through of experience and as a symbolic action' (1). This view of elegy as a process rather than a product relates to its historical role as a lyrical manifestation of mourning, which was composed close to the time of a death and often set to music (Sacks 2). The elegy is a record of the experience of mourning but also a ritual part of the mourning process. Sacks discusses the relationship of mourning, death and desire to literature using a predominantly psychoanalytic approach and identifies a system of symbols and signifiers that typify the elegy. These relate to 'the oedipal resolution' (8) and Lacan's 'mirror stage' (9). However, these symbols are either absent or dramatically reconfigured in queer elegy and a new set of symbols emerges, particularly in response to what Zeiger calls the 'catastrophe-born genre' of AIDS elegy (107). This genre, complicated by activism and the politics of survival, is influential on McGregor's narrative. In the subsequent analysis of the elegiac features of *chemical palace*, I am especially interesting in the author's treatment of death and disease as features of everyday life on the queer scene. Additionally, I am concerned with McGregor's exploration of change and endings as 'elegiac features' of the novel.

Davidson notes that, as well as presenting a narrative about the dissolution of a group of friends and a lifestyle, *chemical palace* incorporates:

[A] more particular lament for the decline of Sydney's queer dance party scene effected by the interimplicated phenomena of inner city gentrification and an increasingly conservative – even repressive – political climate. (142)

Through McGregor's third-person narration and individual character monologues, the reader perceives a sense of impending, profound change for the characters. There is acuity of movement towards an ending or 'winding-down'. Elegiac movement in the narrative firstly depicts a loss of innocence stemming from exposure to disease and the heightened awareness of risk and danger. This facilitates a movement towards a communal – often radical and political – sensibility and way of living in response to poverty, illness and crisis. Finally, the narrative charts a slow movement away from that lifestyle towards the novel's end. This retreat is presented concurrently as a cause for sadness and a necessary and natural transition. On one level, the novel portrays a conventional plotline in which individuals form a group that provides life-changing experiences, before the characters eventually go their separate ways. McGregor's tone and symbolism makes this record of change and dissolution distinctively elegiac, and her decisively communal depiction of death and transformation sets McGregor's text apart as an expression of elegy. Davidson's view that the dying scene is the focus of the novel's lament, rather than the deaths of individual characters, is echoed by the author. Furthermore, Davidson claims that the text memorialises this scene – a claim that I will test here.

McGregor's *chemical palace* is concerned as much with death, loss and endings as with life and renewal. In keeping with a carnivalised sense of the world, the novel represents death as both a devastating and productive force. Additionally, an agrarian philosophy of the cycles of life dominates the presentation of death in McGregor's text:

People died in winter. Her father had died in June, Eddy in July, Rhada's mother in August. Death, the ultimate silence. A silent inward time of year. They thought about the people who had died. Sifted through the past. Searched for things lost forever, carried what could never be discarded. (130)

This extract reveals the writer's appreciation that death is a resolutely natural and un-dramatic occurrence, but also depicts an unapologetic sense of nostalgia. The connection of human mortality to the seasons is essential for demystifying death. For the queer scene in the 1990s, which had been shattered by the chaotic and disconcerting deaths of so many young men from AIDS, this connection provides some comfort and perspective. In the context of McGregor's narrative it also serves to remind readers of the universality of death. This short paragraph captures McGregor's clever use of subject perfectly: it begins with a single subject-protagonist (she/her – in this case, Slip), and effortlessly slides into the plural and collective (they – ambiguous – perhaps all the characters? perhaps the community?). Through this kind of subtle subject-blurring, McGregor creates a text that is distinctively communal whilst still being intensely personal. This is a necessary requirement of the novel's project as a minor literature. McGregor succeeds in expressing a communal sadness and creating a communal elegy, but also maintaining the sense of a community dedicated to individuality. This balance is always required in AIDS elegy, which is a minor literary form. Queer communities use literary forms to honour their dead, to protect the living through promoting safe-sex education, and to articulate their horror and hope. AIDS elegy brings communities together to unite in mourning and struggle.

Race offers a comprehensive explanation for the relationship of dance party culture to HIV/AIDS. He elucidates that:

The wide-scale experience and intuition of death – the death of hundreds of gay men a year – was the backdrop against which the experience of coming together en masse – the presence of thousands of vibrant and sexualised bodies – made a powerful, exciting, and profoundly political statement of resilience and possibility. (*Pleasure* 24)

The intensified experience of togetherness, survival and celebration that arose from defying death created a powerful and empowering sensation of community. Race explains why this heightened empowerment was so heavily associated with clubbing and dance parties during the HIV/AIDS crisis:

The chemically facilitated feelings of togetherness, euphoria, caring and love took on a critical significance. In addition, the temporality of AIDS – the radically reduced life-span an HIV diagnosis meant at this time – generated a variously articulated practical philosophy of living for the moment. (24)

Functioning as the alternative arm of the queer community, The Chemical Palace is a scene that encompasses an anti-consumerist and humanitarian ethos, which produces an even more powerful sense of belonging for participants during the crisis. But it was not AIDS alone that gave rise to this climate. The gay and lesbian rights movement also played a role, as queers became more ambitious about their rights and more public in their activities. For the radical queer subculture, discourses around disease and deviance were fuel for artistic invention, which McGregor strives to capture in her novel. Her passionate descriptions of parties, costumes, themes and props suggest that she is trying to record this unique culture before memories fade. McGregor is aware that there is precious little record of radical queer dance party culture and its cultural products, thus her novel is a record and an elegy for this period of social and cultural intensity.

The 1990s and early 2000s saw a burgeoning radical queer culture that was politically and artistically intense. Images of AIDS patients in art and the media were either horrific – representing society’s fears of the disease, or romanticised – presenting the AIDS sufferer as a noble victim (Crimp 4-5). These stereotypes inspired radical performance artists to (re)identify with the virus, challenging stereotypes and presenting reworked images of the HIV-positive individual. Death from AIDS was unpleasant to observe, with the sufferer wasting away to skin and bones, experiencing rashes and lesions, with their mental health also affected. The relative silence of governments inspired AIDS activist groups such as ACT UP in the USA to become forceful and deliberate in their presentation of issues around HIV and sexuality (Crimp *AIDS* 7). Governments refused to face the issue head-on, using euphemisms and understating the reach of the disease. This tendency of officialdom to ‘talk down’ the impact of AIDS frustrated sufferers and activists immensely. The resulting approach to consciousness-raising and lobbying was a challenging, in-your-face articulation of the realities of AIDS. This approach was passionately embraced by radical sections of the queer community, who utilised graphic and sexualised performance and medical imagery in their art (McGregor *Int.* 1.).

The performative embodiment of the physicality of AIDS is a testament to the progressive and alternative nature of the radical queer community, who refused to hide from the horror of AIDS. Helene Joffe’s (1999) study into HIV infection and the notion of the ‘the other’ found that a vast majority of respondents in surveys about HIV and AIDS in Great Britain and South Africa located the disease outside their own community or racial grouping (53). Respondents who were themselves HIV-positive nevertheless suggested that AIDS was a disease associated with ‘the other’. White men suggested the virus began through sexually deviant behaviour of black men in Africa, and black men suggested it originated in Britain or America (Joffe 39-41). It is interesting to contrast typical attitudes to HIV as an ‘alien’ infection from a ‘foreign’ source with the attitudes represented in McGregor’s novel. For the characters and their community, one way of reclaiming some of the power and agency that HIV removes is through a very public expressive and embodied performance of the virus. Performing the virus is like a second ‘coming out’; a blatant method of identifying oneself with AIDS. Performances of this kind appear frequently in the novel, such as in the ‘dental dams show’, where the label ‘AIDS-CARRIER’ is proudly slapped onto the performer, insinuating a sense of pride in the face of adversity, while offering a critique of labelling. A delighted audience is encouraged to laugh at the virus, or at least at the label. Instead of attempting to disown the virus and disassociate themselves and their community from it (locating it elsewhere like the respondents in Joffe’s study), the characters claim AIDS, thereby embracing its sufferers. McGregor’s *chemical palace* uses individual stories and multiple viewpoints to tell the broader tale of a community’s response to HIV/AIDS. Zeiger explains that this is a common feature of AIDS elegy, which plays a vital role in the ‘cultural discourse dealing with death and mourning’ (108). The traditionally wretched figure of the isolated mourner is replaced with a ‘call to arms’ against the disease, and the ‘line between the dead and the survivors dissolves’, as the speakers in AIDS elegies acknowledge that they are also potentially at risk (Zeiger 108). Death is both political and personal, and the traditional distinction between the subject mourning and the object mourned is challenged. Zeiger tells us that:

As a context for a new communal understanding of death, AIDS requires awareness of a new relation between subject and object constituted by the realities of shared endangerment. (127)

AIDS elegy is always focused simultaneously on the past and the future. The AIDS death represents for the mourning community both the passing of a loved one and a reminder of the battle faced by the community. In the community's war against the virus, the dance party was a powerful weapon. Race says:

The massed bodies, decorations, lights, drugs, costumes, and music combined to produce a powerful and widely accessed perception of presence, belonging, shared circumstance and vitality at a time when the image of the gay man, dying alone, ostracized from family, was the publicly proffered alternative. (24)

In *chemical palace* there is a distinctive solidarity between those who suffer (or die) from disease and those around them. HIV and hepatitis C are seen as 'community problems' rather than individual struggles. This idealistic blurring of the edges between those who are positive and those who are not affects the shape of McGregor's narrative. Death is an ongoing symbol, not a trial faced and overcome by the survivors, and disease does not necessarily end in death. Two of the novel's main characters live with disease (Holmes with HIV and Slip with Hepatitis C) without death intruding on their personal narratives (they do not die in the book). However, the spectre of death is a constant companion and there is a sense that they have been lucky to escape it. AIDS elegy complicates the very idea of death: no longer final – no longer a 'full stop' – death is both an enemy to be resisted, and a natural aspect of the human life-cycle. In *chemical palace*, Slip's plotline removes all sense of the dramatic from the theme of disease. Slip's illness is slow-moving and unremarkable; there's no narrative climax, just periods of health and languor. Likewise, Holmes' HIV-positive status is an aspect of his character, but it is not elevated above others. Unlike conventional elegy, AIDS elegies, including *chemical palace*, communicate a sense of hope and continuity of life.

While *chemical palace* contains elements common to hypertext, the use of the novel as a medium (as opposed to, say, an online hypertext format) allows McGregor to employ sophisticated symbolism, complex narrative movement and symmetry as well as participating in a literary tradition by creating an enduring cultural artefact. Some of the novel's most interesting features are its largely-ignored Australian Literary intertextualities, such as the references to Park. McGregor also successfully alters conventional novel formats by including hypertext intrusions, such as the following song lyrics, which articulate a prophecy of change:

And when it came time for the end
and when it came time for the end
and when it came time for the end
the men will look like the women
and the women like the men,
and some will dance in a hypnotic trance
like as if they have no care,
but these are the signs
of the changing times
that the end is drawing near.
... (29)

This prophetic intrusion contributes to the elegiac tone of the novel as well as presenting complex gender imagery. The issue of gender transformation and 'gender-fucking' are simplified and presented in a self-consciously ironic faux dramatic fashion. The reader is encouraged to see humour in the idea that gender-play signifies a fundamental breakdown in the social fabric. This extract performs the dual duty of suggesting a genuine change is coming for the characters, while ironically criticising the conservative suggestion that alternative lifestyles, where gender conventions are challenged, are sacrilegious and damaging to human

society. The poem also contrasts superbly with the following description of the cheerful friendly antics that ensue when the group stops to enjoy the sun in Hyde Park after a night out. In this paragraph, the characters are referred to by aliases adopted to match costumes donned for the previous night's festivities:

... Out of office tower wilderness and into the oasis of Hyde Park verdancy, stopping by the Archibald Fountain. Jackie Onassid took off her platforms and danced barefoot across the grass while Jackie No with fallen branches from the kentia palms fanned the men in their hot outfits. Stash to one side in his high heels combing his long hair with finger, Bee and Bella on all fours playing cows in the clover, their corseted bums squeezed white as statues. It was Sunday morning and there was almost no one around, just a small group approaching to attend mass at St Mary's. Jackie No and Shifty set upon Bee and Bella with the palm frond floggers. (25)

This extract is fantastic in its simplicity and subtle celebratory tone. Typically understated, the passage draws a perfect portrait of perversity in the light of innocence and fun. Contrasting with dark and hypersexualised images of BDSM practice, the corseted girls represented as frolicking cows strips any connotations of sadism from the image of them being 'flogged' gleefully with the palm fronds. Simple but effective scenes like this contribute to the novel's affirmative and humanising representation of alternative communities and lifestyles. The juxtaposition of the early morning church crowd with the radical queer revellers, and the proximity of the church to Oxford Street, draw the reader's attention to the author's own contradictory experience of being a radical queer who was raised a Catholic. In this scene the two contradictory philosophies appear to coexist in good-natured harmony. This nostalgic scene presents a snapshot of blithe and carefree radical young queers in their prime. The poem quoted prior ensures that readers' perceive the imminent demise of this lifestyle, making the scene even more idyllic.

Throughout McGregor's novel a consistently elegiac feature is the impending drawing-near of tragedy – an unambiguous sensation that things are coming to an end. This sensation is encapsulated in the portion of the novel where Billy and traffic become increasingly aware that the end of their relationship is imminent. In a scene well before their inevitable break-up, during sex, Billy feels 'the ghosts of other people ... sliding between them' (154). Later she tries to draw a portrait of a sleeping traffic but cannot capture her features on the page:

The face of traffic trod a line between the exquisite and grotesque, could have come from anywhere was incongruous everywhere. ... The face of traffic in repose was the uninhabited suit, empty stage, unlit room. Billy tore out the page, crushed it between her palms and threw it into the bin. (156)

Billy's difficulty in drawing traffic is a metaphor for her incapacity to understand the women she loves. The character of traffic is represented as always running, always in motion, as the name suggests. Her name and character represent a decisive quality of radical queer ethos and the lifestyle McGregor memorialises in the novel; a 'life that was lived and not saved up for, a daily creation' (31). The character of traffic stands for a fluidity of sexuality, subjectivity, politics and identity and the worshipping of difference as an ideal. She is also genuinely uninterested in material wealth and success. The character of Billy, on the other hand, represents a desire for something more settled and constant, as well as for recognition and achievement. Billy's inability to capture traffic in a portrait metaphorically foreshadows the end of the relationship, and the relationship itself is a metaphor for the lifestyle and the scene. Like traffic and Billy's relationship, the scene in the novel is fated to end (or evolve) as participants get older, society becomes more conservative, and cultures shift. The novel's most powerful dramatic tension is in the paradox of trying to memorialise a transient and fluid

subculture, whose ideals are – by definition – always changing. How can we mourn something that only exists in an ephemeral sense? How can we regret the changing of a scene that is characterised by constant transformation? Yet mourning the ephemeral scene is precisely what the narrative inspires us to do. Radical alternative communities are formed in response to the mainstream and, as that mainstream changes so must the alternative. As the centre shifts so does the periphery. The Chemical Palace was always going to be contextual and temporary. However, even a culture created in the margins and empty spaces of society, and built from its discarded cultural and literal rubbish, develops traditions and conventions, and these can be mourned. The socio-political and cultural context of the 1990s and early 2000s meant that radical queers were unusually active in their creative and social endeavours, producing a vibrant way of life and a distinct aesthetic. The passing of these spirited times is grieved by participants.

Little deaths: pleasure... risk... injection

The collective sense of responsibility and shared resolve in the face of HIV/AIDS that characterised queer social scenes in the 1990s also manifested a reciprocal awareness of risk and endangerment. Due to the prevalence of HIV/AIDS, illness and death were conflated with pleasure, freedom and self-expression; particularly for the gay male community and injecting drug users. Prior to the availability of successful treatments, AIDS seemed to be a death sentence. While queer people were celebrating their hard-won – and still incomplete – right to actively express their sexuality that very expression was becoming a sight of anxiety and danger. However, the risk of infection did not lead to a culture of abstinence, as most queer people demonstrated a self-conscious ‘refusal to resign their attachment to life, the body, pleasure, [and] political engagement’ (Zeiger 133). There were exceptions to this rule and within queer communities vast differences in opinion regarding how to stop the disease from claiming more lives were expressed. For McGregor’s characters, this contention is paramount, as they face risk and danger frequently in pursuit of self-development. There are acute hazards associated with sex and drug use in this period, but McGregor demonstrates that queer communities were also becoming empowered, with safe-sex and safe-injecting practices gaining popularity. Nevertheless, the moments of danger and images of peril depicted in the text contribute a weighty symbolic legacy.

Sacks claims that pleasure and sexuality have always been associated with elegiac narratives, and Zeiger reveals that this relationship is constructed very differently in AIDS elegy:

The social and sexual are interconnected rather than compartmentalized and placed at odds. Gunn’s classically informed, deliberate crafting of a life requires an intense involvement with others, with a community, but communal contact is not necessarily sentimentalized or devoid of aggression. (121)

McGregor’s narrative demonstrates how this connection between the ‘social and sexual’, largely absent from conventional elegy, typifies AIDS elegy. McGregor explores the paradoxical connection between sex and death in queer imagery by juxtaposing narratives of mortality, infection and drug-abuse with celebratory stories of sexual discovery and positive drug-taking experiences. The novel’s insistence on a positive representation of these outlawed behaviours completes McGregor’s sophisticated presentation of the sex/death/life paradigm. Sex and pleasure are represented as both creative *and* destructive. Moments in the narrative that deal with these issues are often presented in a positive light but most commonly in a neutral way, such as in the following:

Jimi was beckoning traffic from the bathroom door. Can you do it for me? She mixed up while Jimi entertained the mirror. Since his arrival in Sydney traffic had watched him grow rougher, louder, funnier, less easy to please and more comfortable with his own reflection. No shooters on our mirror, Jimi, we've just cleaned it. Don't be disgusting, I'm not squeezing pimples. Yeh right. Pump, will you? Jimi proffered his clenched forearm. No, I've moved onto bigger things, traffic, like herpes and HIV. She injected him swiftly, leaving no blood, then Jimi left for 32. (115-6)

This extract captures a causal drug-taking scene where traffic injects Jimi; assumedly with speed or crystal methamphetamine. The big-sisterly eye of traffic observes that Jimi has changed since moving to Sydney and while there is a subtle hint of sentimentality in the observation, it is relatively neutral, especially considering the self-reflexively ironic implication of Jimi having 'moved on' to 'herpes and HIV'. The following lines intimate that traffic has a skill for injection and the simple statement 'then Jimi left for 32' (presumably a club) is characteristic of McGregor's balanced and understated style when writing about drug use. Instances of drug use – especially injection – are generally presented in a melodramatic fashion in literature and on film, so McGregor's matter-of-fact style is refreshing. She even manufactures a touching intimacy between the two as they share the act of penetration, where traffic's skill and Jimi's trust in her are highlighted.

Penetration – whether by needles, fingers, fists or penises – is constructed as both pleasurable and threatening at the same time (Zeiger 121). The performance of an act of penetration has sometimes contradictory consequences for the ego. Whilst penetration can be pleasurable, it can also be bound up in a struggle for dominance and power and in some cases the receiver is still perceived to be the less-powerful party. Penetration symbolises a 'little death' of the ego – particularly the male ego, but also the female ego. The ego dies a little as we surrender power and employ trust, and the experience of pleasure is heightened by the emotional risk involved. The intensity of corporeal intimacy complicates the interaction. While this is only one way of understanding penetrative activities, Zeiger identifies the notion of the little death as a contributing factor in the fresh elegiac imagery found in AIDS elegy. She also explains that:

The traditional modes of male bonding and rivalry characteristic of traditional elegy are reconstructed in AIDS elegies in a celebratory sexual context... (120)

When we add the potential danger of contagion to this mix the risk-factor of sexual activity increases and the relationship between sex and death takes on an additional *literal* quality. The AIDS elegy poems studied by Zeiger represent HIV/AIDS as an 'ironically fatal coincidence' of risky sexual behaviour, but never as a punishment (122). Musing on her contraction of Hepatitis C in *chemical palace*, Slip considers the random and arbitrary nature of infection:

Where did it come from? Through the eye of some long forgotten drug buddy's needle, a microbe releasing its tint slowly along her twenties, silting the years with melancholy and inertia. The sickness came on without her even knowing it. (120)

Readers discern McGregor's matter-of-fact attitude towards the 'bad luck' of contracting disease. There is no question of blame or 'destiny': disease is simply a microbiological incident, a random and dispassionate occurrence. In protest of the tendency for victims of HIV to be blamed for the disease, activist organisation ACT UP in the USA promoted that all people with HIV and AIDS were 'innocent' (splashed across posters and banners in the 1980s). This is echoed by Charles Roberts (1994) who writes:

I am getting very tired of the often negative way in which people with HIV are portrayed to the world by the *Sacred Four*. (By the Sacred Four, I mean: 1, the

governments of the world; 2, the media; 3, institutionalised religion; and 4, the medical establishment.) ... I am forced by the media to fight on because of the portrayal of 'innocent' and 'guilty' victims. (16)

This progressive viewpoint constructed HIV/AIDS as a global, national, governmental and community responsibility, rather than the fault of individuals or any identity-grouping. In keeping with this perspective, the characters in *chemical palace* perceive infection as an unfortunate result of poor providence combined with a deficiency of health information, education and resources. However, McGregor's narrative also asserts that risk and danger are connected with pleasure which is presented as a central component of the lifestyles represented in the novel.

Slip's Hepatitis C infection – an unintended consequence of injecting drugs - highlights the arbitrary nature of infection as a theme in *chemical palace*. Penetration is a textual performance that is repeated many times in the novel through sex and drug injection. The repetition of acts of penetration serves different functions in the text, from cementing the idea of a culture of pleasure and promoting a sex-positive view-point, to marking changes in character relationships; but the fact that penetrative acts are presented repeatedly does not imply symbolic monotony. Each act serves a distinct purpose in the text and in the lives of the characters. The repetition of graphic sexual acts in the novel signifies both liveliness and demise, expressing Zeiger's paradox that sex is a sign of life *and* death. Sex signifies healthy relationships, and an active libido signifies physical health, but in the context of contagion sex is also a site of potential fatality. For McGregor's characters, performing pleasure-seeking through sex and drug use has the potential to lead to exposure. Love is dangerous, bodies are dangerous and penetration is risky. The object of your desire may also be an object of threat to you. Yet, for McGregor's characters, avoiding these activities would also be a kind of death. Therefore, life itself is danger. This concept shifts somewhat towards the end of the book, in line with the historical context: safe sex was becoming more readily understood and better-ingrained into the subculture and safe drug use was more accessible. McGregor posits this change as a positive one by including very deliberate references to safer sexual practice, sterile needle-play and safe drug use throughout the novel. She also expresses nostalgia for a freer and more innocent time, when human interactions were not informed by fear of the other, fear of penetration and fear of breaching skin and contaminating blood. The radical world-view expressed in McGregor's novel also proposes that these corporeal breaches represent a sincere and absolute experience of human connection.

In August 2007 at Artspace, Wollomooloo, Fiona McGregor and Ana Wojak – known collectively as 'senVoodoo' – investigated this concept through an installation/performance piece called 'Font'. The performance involved the insertion of a cannula into each of their forearms as they faced each other, bleeding into a large font of water, accompanied by sacrosanct music and lighting. As the two women bled into the font their blood intermingled. The piece is described in the artists' accompanying handout as a 'tableaux vivant about intimacy, fear and disease', and depicts the tension between McGregor's hepatitis C-positive status and Wojak's negative status. Material provided to the audience articulates the artists' vision for the work:

Corporeal pain and the breaching of the skin, as utilised in the performance work of McGregor and Wojak (senVoodoo), serve as vehicles for accessing a realm of intense

focus. ... When the skin is breached, intensely emotive forces of trust, intimacy and power exchange take place between a positive and negative performer.²⁷

The insightful work depicts an affiliation between risk and intimacy, reflecting on the potential intensity of such experiences. This relationship is explored in *chemical palace* through drug-related experiences, sexual interactions and pain-related performances. The Font performance introduces pain as a potentially positive and constructive force – a concept familiar to BDSM practice. The handout asserts that the bodily pain assists the participants in accessing ‘a realm of intense focus’, and this realm offers possibilities for intensified connection between the parties, as well as manufacturing alternative experiences of pleasure and self-challenge. This intensity of experience also represents a little death of the ego. The skin – which is represented as the ‘protective barrier for the psyche’²⁸ – is breached deliberately and publicly. The conscious, voluntary breach of that barrier signifies a desire to dispel the ego and dissolve distinctions between self/other, inside/outside, and me/not me. Performances in *chemical palace* involving needle-play look at this concept in stunning detail.

Self-inflicted pain is a powerful tool for expressing internal conflict or emotional pain. The novel maintains the view of BDSM practice that proposes a constructive role for the controlled experience of pain, which may assist practitioners in taking control of their bodies and asserting a sense of authority over the self. After the death of her father, Slip uses self-inflicted pain (often derisively referred to as ‘self-mutilation’) as a tool to work through her internal responses to the death:

With a new blade she cuts a series of shallow incisions into her thigh, rubs alcohol into the wounds till the burning seizes her leg, her entire body in its hot fist. So the blood is pumping and she feels at last. The next day she goes and gets her nipples pierced. The pain is fantastic. (127)

The desire to enact her experience on her body is also bound up with Slip’s Hepatitis C: she describes her illness as numbing, and reveals that because of her constant fatigue she feels as though she ‘can’t feel, can’t mourn’ (126). Her self-inflicted pain is empowering in that it gives her control over when, where and how she experiences her emotions. In Slip’s case, the self-inflicted pain is not designed to cause damage: the blade (a sharp and precise instrument) is new, minimizing the chance of infection and scarring, and the incisions are purposefully shallow. The rubbing alcohol performs two functions in the scene; increasing the experience of pain and acting as an antiseptic. The antithesis of stereotypical representations of self-harm as ‘out of control’, self-destructive behaviour, this scene depicts a controlled and sober practice of working through pain in a way that is, arguably, not destructive at all, but productive.

Slip has a number of facial and body piercings, each of which represents the death of a friend or family member, or the anniversary of a significant event in her life. This fact imbues the practice of body-piercing with a ritualistic importance typical of McGregor’s characters and their community. Piercing herself in a non-permanent manner (play-piercing) is another way of accessing this realm of ritual meaning-making, without having to outlay the significant costs associated with permanent piercings. So the act of piercing – which has many possible configurations and allows for endless creativity – fulfils multiple functions. To mark her purchase of the new turntables that facilitate her burgeoning career as a DJ, Slip pierces her navel with a number of play-piercing needles in the shape of a ‘flower of fire’ (162). The

²⁷ ‘Font’ artists’ handout included at Appendix 4.

²⁸ ‘Font’ artists’ handout.

reader is told that 'these little rituals were important' (162). Far from the dramatic, self-destructive and dangerous images often associated with similar activities, we observe that Slip 'moves into serenity' as a result of the pain (162). Once again, safety and 'best practice' are critical in McGregor's representation of these procedures: Slip swabs the area with alcohol, uses sterile, packaged needles and puts the used sharps into a secure disposable sharps container. These aspects of the practice strip it of connotations of destruction, desperation and self-abuse and imbue it with the careful, skilled and practiced character of ritual.

Moments of symbolic connection between sex and death are among the most elegiac in the novel. Through graphic but undramatic depictions of the sexual activity between traffic and Billy, McGregor communicates a powerful and poignant metaphor for the dissolving scene. Regardless of their efforts, the girls' lives move in different directions, threatening to break the lovers up:

She doubted Billy, she doubted the two of them, most of all she doubted herself. As though her desire had waited so long that it had spent itself without her knowing it. She had to summons herself constantly to be present at all times. She was fucking other people in her head, she was making love to something dying. And when she realised this, she began to grieve, and when she began to grieve each fuck was a farewell. Bittersweet, agonising, utterly desperate. Billy still recovering, her hot feverish skin, shudder of coughing torso midfuck. traffic joined her in helplessness and need. She fell into drama, she lost herself all over again. (136)

The poetic style of this extract is realised by building numerous short phrases that begin with 'she' upon one another. The result is a rhythm of lament which culminates in the line 'she was making love to something dying'; a somewhat grotesque and tragic image that haunts the reader and instils Billy's feverish, shuddering body with a disturbing quality. The phrases that follow continue the pattern, with the repetition of 'and' (followed by short statements) denoting the unstoppable force of separation that is coming between the lovers. For traffic, the feelings of pity she experiences for her lover are a source of disgust and disgrace. Realising she is no longer attracted to Billy as she once was, traffic feels an overwhelming shame that is offset by playing the 'doctor' during Billy's illness. However, the image of Billy falling apart physically, a weak and helpless mess, haunts traffic as a metaphor for the way that she has begun to see Billy. For traffic, whose life is largely lived on impulse, having to 'summons herself constantly to be present' is an unbearable labour. Each sexual interaction comes to signify their last, because traffic knows the relationship is advancing towards demise. This undisclosed awareness makes sexual relations with Billy tragic and wretched for traffic. Each time they have sex after this revelation is like a little death in the text, prophesising not only the end of their relationship but the end of their way of life.

In keeping with the genre of elegy, *chemical palace's* narrative structure features a clear and perceivable movement through tragedy and darkness to rebirth and new beginnings: As for the content and direction of its ritual movement, the elegy follows the ancient rites in the basic passage through grief or darkness to consolation and renewal. (Sacks 20)

In a symbolic sense, this renewal is achieved for traffic when (while still with Billy) she has a threesome at a party while Billy is away. For traffic, stagnation is death, and the threesome with relative strangers represents a renewal of her sexuality and exploration of repressed desires. After the threesome she muses: 'To look with lust into a stranger's eyes, touch new skin, kiss alien lips, to arc even wider outside herself' (148). Rebirth is repeatedly associated with sex in *chemical palace*, as in the scene where Holmes and Jimi have sex at an industrial

worksite in Coniston: 'Holmes, who hadn't had sex for months and none unsafe since diagnosis, felt when Jimi's flesh enclosed his that he was being resurrected.' (52) Other activities that provide a similar renewal are: learning new skills, ending old relationships, beginning new relationships, deaths of friends or family, etc. McGregor's novel is strongly characterised by a literary feature that Sacks refers to as the 'rhythm of lament', which draws the reader on by building, breaking and dissipating grief (23). Linguistic repetition, common in McGregor's passages, creates a gentle rhythm that is the antithesis of shock and trauma, allowing the reader to follow the characters through the natural processes of mourning (Sacks 23). The movement of *chemical palace* can be understood to follow this elegiac pattern, progressing from 'setting the scene' and depicting a period of joy and stability, to portraying crisis, disruption and change, through to darkness, and finally out of darkness into to consolation and renewal. However, McGregor's non-linear narrative structure and multidirectional perspective are departures from the conventional elegy.

Who killed the dance party?

In *chemical palace* the impetus for mourning is more often change than death: changes to the city, the loss of old communities and subcultural affinities, the dispersion of people as inner-city ghettos dissolve, the ending of relationships and of the characters' lifestyle, and the discontinuation of their cultural practices. On a philosophical level, the novel bemoans changes in the 'spirit' of society represented by the tightening-up of legal and social restrictions that prevents spontaneity of public gathering and merriment. McGregor provides a detailed list of reasons for the demise of the radical queer scene she represented in *chemical palace*:

Gee ... gentrification seems to be universal. ... We are more litigious – more Americanised – hence the tightening of insurance and public health and safety regs which have really hampered what you can do in a venue – from playing music, through decorating, even dancing in a bar like the oxford downstairs is now illegal. Specifically, NSW Licensing Laws have always been notoriously draconian. ... The world is more corporate in general. More preoccupied with personal wealth and personal space, than communal. ... And of course the all-pervasive climate of fear and conservatism that began in the 90s. S11 fanned that spark into an inferno. (Int. 1.)

This comprehensive set of factors contributed to what McGregor sees as a dramatic decrease in Sydney's radical queer freak party culture. Increasing wealth and gentrification of the inner-city has driven anti-capitalist and alternative youth communities out of the inner-city to suburbs like Enmore, Marrickville and Dulwich Hill, and in 2010 even these suburbs are becoming unaffordable to students. Paddington, Darlinghurst and Surry Hills had already been gentrified, but in the early and mid 2000s, even Oxford Street became more 'designer' and 'less gay', with a number of exclusive, 'straight' venues opening in the 2000s. This has changed the nature of queer ghettos, so that communities (or their potential members) are more widely-spread. Changes to public liability insurance and a tightening up of police surveillance, as recorded in McGregor's novel, made it very difficult to hold non-profit party events, particularly in public spaces, and the increasing individualism, materialism and 'climate of fear and conservatism' of Australia in the John Howard era also eroded this community culture. Most of these factors have universal ramifications for Australian society as well as for queer communities, and have resulted in changes to party culture generally and a sharp decline in the public use of public space. The gentrification of Sydney's inner-city areas has not been confined to the 1980s and 1990s. Areas like Surry Hills have been through various incarnations – from a slum in the 1940s and 1950s, to an area of relative affluence in

the 1990s and 2000s. The same rows of cramped terrace houses that once housed three or more families each in squalid conditions are now renovated, high-priced neighbourhoods that house professional couples and small upper-middle-class families. McGregor's characters are caught up in this ever-present process, eventually being moved on from their communal warehouse when it is sold to a developer (360). The sale of the warehouse is one of the most heart-rending moments in the novel, as it denotes the passing of youth and an idyllic way of life. Slip fondly remembers a time when one could rent a bed-sit in Sydney for \$33 a week, bemoaning the rapid increases in the cost of accommodation and living that fracture inner-city youth communities (166). In areas like Darlinghurst and Kings Cross these developments have had the effect of driving alternative youth and members of the queer community out of their traditional ghettos, leaving only those who can afford the rents and property prices. McGregor's characters mourn the demise of their communal warehouse, feeling as though they are 'losing not just a limb but a heart and soul as well' (360). The apocalyptic depiction of the characters' final weeks in the warehouse communicates that a profound transformation is taking place, affecting not just the queer scene but the whole entire city:

Sydney was a lost world from the past, an unattainable jewel, seductive, elusive, full of people who had somewhere to live. During the last days a yellow-black pall moved over the sky as bushfires began all around the city. They woke with the burn of smoke in their throats, soot drifting through the rooms into their packing. Drove to the beach in the evening and cooled off in the water sealed with ash, cigarette tip of sun burning a dirty sky. The world was ending. (360)

Gentrification alone does not account for the changes in social functioning that led to the demise in Sydney of live music, street parties, spontaneous communal use of public space and the vibrant radical performance scene. According to McGregor, legislative changes affecting licensing and venues, and an increased focus of law and order on 'party drugs' also played a significant role. She also explains that the introduction of exorbitant Public Liability Insurance requirements crippled the live music scene in parts of Australia. McGregor proposes that these developments were not isolated to Sydney but signified an increasingly risk-averse, economic rationalist and self-protective social trend that was universal. Ulrich Beck's theory of the 'risk society' proposes that there are both hazards and opportunities inherent in the context of 'reflexive modernity' that modern, westernised societies find themselves in:

The system of coordinates in which life and thinking are fastened in industrial modernity – the axes of gender, family and occupation, the belief in science and progress – begins to shake, and a new twilight of opportunities and hazards comes into existence – the contours of the risk society. (15)

Risks are defined predominantly in a physical sense as endangerment to the earth and its inhabitants but there are also risks in the form of challenges to industrial ideals of family, citizenship, lifestyle and sexuality (13). Beck's risk society involves a paradox of greater individualisation and personal freedom coming into conflict with increasing control and organisation of people by authority. The paradox is that while questioning and becoming increasingly cynical towards authority, science, government and institutions, we have become increasingly reliant on these institutions to limit our exposure to risk. McGregor's *chemical palace* articulates a desire to fight the tendency to seek paternalistic protection from the institutions and organisations that (ironically) create and sanction the conditions which produce many of these risks. McGregor bemoans the 'all pervasive climate of fear and conservatism' of the Howard era in 1990s. This atmosphere is expressed in the clamp down of laws governing public space and the increasing regulation of that space. Paranoia about the risks involved with uncontrolled, uninhibited partying drove much of the radical queer party

culture of the 1980s and 1990s underground, limiting access to venues, policing the kinds of performance that were allowed and restraining the activity of party-goers. Beck trumpets both the hazards and opportunities inherent in our reflexive modernisation, but McGregor suggests that paranoia about risk has triumphed over excitement for the 'new twilight of opportunities' in the 'noughties', eroding The Chemical Palace and spontaneous leisure culture more broadly.

Paradoxically, risk is a fundamental and self-consciously integral part of the way of life in *chemical palace*. Risks including biological hazards, the risk of social isolation due to not pursuing a standard adult life-path, various risks of drug use, and the risks associated with poverty. This is a lifestyle of risk – where the relationship of individuals to risk is complex and always under investigation. The philosophical positioning of radical queers, however, is not risk-averse. If anything, it is risk-positive and risk-aware. For Beck, the primary risk facing humanity in the modern era is the fact that risks are determined by forces that are out of the hands of those at risk (4). Certainly, therefore, it is radical to take risk into one's own hands. In the same way that scientists and 'experts' are relied upon to legitimise and control industrial activities, contemporary authorities seeks to manage and restrain leisure activities by defining where, when and how we may enjoy ourselves. The activities described in *chemical palace* demonstrate a reflexive attitude to leisure culture that is challenging to the status quo: 'If what you want doesn't exist already you create it yourself' (2). Participants in this scene actively engage in a de-legitimation of authority by acting outside of it. When they are not actively resisting aspects of social domination, they are basically ignoring it, creating their own semi-private public spaces, with radical economies of meaning and progressive ethical guidelines. Participants experience consequential pleasure through resisting the paranoia of a capitalist risk society by reclaiming public space and using it in prohibited ways. In these self-defined spaces, they *self*-manage risk, instead of seeking paternalistic protection from it at the hands of the police, security, government, etc (see Siokou and Moore 2008, and Siokou 2002, for analysis of the changing dance party scene). Slip reveals the extent of the transformation of public space in her description of a Mardi Gras parade in 1980s:

You could wander up and watch the Mardi Gras parade at any point along Oxford Street. There were no barriers in most places because there weren't that many spectators, mostly locals who'd join in if they saw a friend in a passing float. (166)

This statement articulates nostalgia for a time when public space was less constrained by the kind of paranoia and policing associated with the risk society of the noughties.

While the shifting social paradigm played a significant role in the diminishment of radical queer dance party culture, there are also factors specific to the queer community that feature in the decrease. One of these factors relates to the relative success of AIDS activism in Australia and abroad. As governments and health organisations were eventually forced to listen to the voices calling for recognition of the need to fight HIV and support those infected, there was a sense that the AIDS crisis was under control, and infection rates did drop. HIV/AIDS continues to affect people in Australia, but the provision of services, treatments and support has decreased the powerful sense of urgency that united and motivated the queer community in the 1990s, and this decreasing sense of urgency may be connected to a decline in radicalisation of queer communities, generally (Race 27). In charting the rise and fall of the queer dance party, Race formulates several cogent estimations. His focus is the mainstream gay and lesbian parties, Mardi Gras and Sleaze Ball, where McGregor is concerned with the minor, more rebellious parties that often arose as an alternative to these 'gay and lesbian' events. However, there is an intrinsic link between the fates of both. Race's explanation for the

power of the dance party during the crisis can also be applied to understanding the radicalisation depicted in *chemical palace*, and his exploration of the waning popularity of large-scale dance parties in the post-crisis period is a good starting point for examining changes in *The Chemical Palace*. Race reveals that in the wake of the crisis, the social practices associated with large-scale dance party events lost much of their social and political significance and began to represent commodity culture (the pink dollar) and even a *stagnation* of queer community cultural practice (27). He says:

The undulating mass no longer appears as a diverse community bound together by a singular sensibility, but takes the shape of a chaotic and alienating crowd. The congregation of bodies is no longer ‘an incredibly powerful statement about being here,’ but an aggregate of individual consumers. The dance party starts to manifest ‘the phony spell of a commodity.’ (Race 28)

Of course radical sections of the queer community, such as those described in *chemical palace*, had in fact started holding alternative Mardi Gras events almost from the beginning. HIV/AIDS could not homogenise a queer community that was divided along political lines and the radical queers frequently held events they considered more accessible, affordable and inclusive than the Mardi Gras parties; which at that stage were largely ‘gay male space’. However, McGregor’s characters traverse multiple worlds, including heterosexual scenes (such as punk and rock concerts) and mainstream gay and lesbian scenes. Radical queer cultural practice does not occur in a bubble, so *The Chemical Palace* was touched by the same transformative forces that, according to Race, ‘killed’ the (gay and lesbian) dance party.

Bitter-sweet: nostalgia in chemical palace

The societal changes identified by Race and Beck go some way towards explaining McGregor’s elegiac tone. It is also pertinent to consider how the author’s own life story shapes the text. The sensation that the radical queer dance party scene is diminished might be attributed to an actual decrease in events, but it may also be a product of the author’s own decreasing involvement. In seeking to determine which of these is the case we must interrogate nostalgia in McGregor’s work, as well as considering contemporary manifestations of the culture the novel represents. Nostalgia and sentimentality are common to elegiac texts, and feature significantly in *chemical palace*. The style McGregor employs in her work demonstrates an awareness of the novel’s role as a record for a minor community. However, the text oscillates between presenting an indulgent, sometimes sentimental *rewriting* of the past and a sophisticated, progressive record that holds both historic and sociological value. Each of these factors is crucial to the novel’s success and integrity. The unashamed celebration of radical queer culture is intrinsic to the book’s sociological importance as it *embodies* the values of the scene, rather than simply describing them. So, what is the role of nostalgia in *chemical palace*? Dubravka Ugresic’s (1996) work on nostalgia and memory in the context of post-communist Europe provides a point of entry to the discussion:

Nostalgia is not subject to control, it is a subversive activity of our brain. Nostalgia works with fragments, scents, touch, sound, melody, colour, its territory is absence, it is the capricious corrective to adaptive memory. The strategies of its activity are deceit, capriciousness, subversion, suddenness, shock and surprise. (230)

Ugresic’s work implies that nostalgia is a powerful universal force that remains a lasting feature of culture and literature. In *chemical palace*, nostalgia features in descriptions of the era, and can be somewhat romantic: ‘The ethos was simple. Open up the living room doors and share the magic’ (2). Off-setting this romantic tone, McGregor’s employs a subversive and sophisticated nostalgia in describing the warehouse where characters lived, loved and

played throughout the novel, ending the passage with: 'Eventually the warehouse was sold to a developer' (3). What is the difference between these two types of nostalgia? In *The Future Of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), Svetlana Boym divides nostalgia into two main categories: restorative and reflective (49). According to Boym, restorative nostalgia resides in the sphere of sentimentality, whereas reflective nostalgia demonstrates a critical sensitivity towards the past and its remnants in the present. She tells us that:

Nostalgics of the second type are aware of the gap between identity and resemblance; the home is in ruins or, on the contrary, has been renovated and gentrified beyond recognition. (50)

It is no coincidence that images of palaces and ruins appear in texts concerned with change and upheaval, or that the forces of 'progress', gentrification and renovation feature frequently in nostalgic discourses. If we accept Boym's distinction between the two types of nostalgia, then our most relevant frame of reference when dealing with *chemical palace* is reflective nostalgia:

Reflective nostalgia is a positive force that promotes consideration of potentialities for the future based on a complex relationship to the past; both its negative and positive aspects. (50)

In *chemical palace*, change is not viewed as a singularly negative force, and the present is not depicted as a betrayal of an idyllic past. The past is remembered fondly and some of its people, places and specifics are mourned, but a sense of renewal accompanies the nostalgic sadness. McGregor's images of the past are generally not sentimentalised or re-imagined in a romantic light (there are exceptions), and the inclusion of narratives of drug abuse, death, disease and poverty ensure a balanced depiction of the lifestyle and scene represented. However, nostalgia does play a crucial role in the novel's task of memorialising a vanishing sub-subculture and is an important part of what makes the novel a kind of historical fiction, rather than simply fiction. Although she acknowledges that she did not set out to write an elegy, McGregor says: 'with hindsight I wanted the book to be regarded as a memory of those times, a valid historical document.' (Int. 1.) Utilising Boym's category of reflective nostalgia, we can analyse the role of nostalgia as a subversive but positive force in the construction of the narrative without giving up the view that the novel is both critical and celebratory. Boym even uses the word 'play' when describing the positive potentiality of nostalgia: 'Reflective nostalgia is a form of deep mourning that performs a labor of grief both through pondering pain and through play that points to the future' (55).

Restorative nostalgia (which seeks to reinstate the past) has given the collective experience and expression of nostalgia a bad name. However, collective nostalgia is not always a regressive and conservative force. Illuminating the fact that 'remembering doesn't have to be disconnected from thinking', Boym proposes the possibility of a critical communal nostalgia (53). This is especially important in the arena of collective memory and cultural record. Boym refers to the ideas of Lev Vygotsky and Mikhail Bakhtin when she observes that: 'The notion of shared social frameworks of memory is rooted in an understanding of human consciousness, which is dialogical with other human beings and with cultural discourses' (52). Accepting this understanding of memory as intimately connected to community and constructed (and re-constructed) in dialogue with other people and with culture, we see that nostalgia can be a powerful force for the future of a community, not just an individual moment of sentimentality for the past. In *chemical palace*, McGregor self-consciously reconstructs the past from fragments of memory combined with invention, acknowledging in one passage: 'Parties like Multifunk were thus reconstructed from a variety of memories' (50). Acknowledging the subjectivity of human memory allows nostalgic

moments to be read critically and makes their mythologies more overt. Passages that are saturated with nostalgia in *chemical palace* are often melancholic, as well as sentimental. This bitter-sweet paradoxical presentation of nostalgia is a critical component of McGregor's unique style. Passages like the following ensure her presentations of the scene and lifestyle remain balanced:

It took forever to restore to the past its several colours. Only distance and time afforded a view of more variety. All across her history in deeds or the subsequent flights from them, Slip saw so many mistakes and so much misfortune that nothing seemed worth keeping, everything was tainted by death and failure. ... (81)

McGregor's writing is poignant, matter-of-fact and honest. The novel is effective because McGregor contrasts passages like the above with celebratory nostalgic monologues, such as the following from Turkish Jim:

I was a small-town boy from Palmerston North, New Zealand, and Bondi seemed the epitome of Sydney when I first moved here. I lived for a while in a house by the water. Oh, we had wild parties there in the 70s. People fell in love and fell off cliffs, New York Dolls on the stereo. (108)

The novel's critical views on memory and mythology allow readers to see passages like this as positive subjective accounts that represent different snap-shots of the scene.

Reflective nostalgia often results in contexts where relationships were based on 'elective affinities' (53). McGregor's novel portrays the demise of an elective community – a community of choice. Slip's seminal description of Sydney in the 1980s can be analysed for its nostalgic invocation of an elective community:

You have to remember things were different back then. Sydney in the early 80s was so much smaller. Leichhardt was WoopWoop, Oxford Street was starting to take off but was still pretty grimy. It had good food shops, it felt like a real community. There were squats and warehouses and cheap rooms all over the place. I rented a bedsit in Paddington for \$33 a week. (166)

Rather than appealing to ethnic traditions as the marker of society, Slip constructs a sense of community around the availability of cheap housing and food: the fact Oxford Street 'was still pretty grimy' is positive. Even in this affectionate reconstruction, the sense that change is inevitable is unmistakable. Critical nostalgia is useful as it invites a dialogue around change, (re)construction and gentrification. For McGregor, the image of *The Chemical Palace* as a ruin allows her some distance from which to interrogate the scene as it was. Through the character of Billy, McGregor explores the negative impacts of being part of the intimate elective community of their warehouse family. After years of involvement on the radical queer performance scene, Billy grows bored with it and seeks to expand her world and go out on her own, to travel and start a new life away from drugs and social marginalisation. She says: 'I was sick of the grind, I don't know, I felt kind of trapped. I was sick of Sydney, it was getting so pretentious' (33). Billy's alternative view provides an important counterpoint to traffic's obsessive passion and enthusiasm for her community and counteracts the nostalgic sense with which the scene is remembered in many parts of the novel:

It wasn't just Billy that traffic had fallen for. She fell for an ethos she initially thought they shared. A life that was lived and not saved up for, a daily creation. And Billy all the while was wanting something elsewhere, and commitment, stability. traffic threw away all of her plans while Billy was just getting around to making them. (31)

By presenting two widely varying points of view on the same scene and lifestyle, McGregor creates a more balanced and objective picture of the scene and allows the reader to draw their own conclusions. The most obvious markers of nostalgia in McGregor's novel are the

collective pronouns and distinctive references to the past ('back all those years ago' (23)). The individual character monologues often use 'we' when referring to the past, and although the unidentified non-specific narrator mostly uses 'they', it does slip into using 'us' ('let us party, let us in' (361)). McGregor's nostalgia doesn't seek to rebuild what has past, but 'lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history' in order to shed light on the present (Boym 41). Characters lament the passing of old lifestyles and communities, but do so with a critical self-consciousness. Holmes says: 'If the earlier times were happier why are the worst the first to resurface? Is it sadness that dominates our past or just my interpretation?' (6) Svetlana Boym suggests that in 'the moment of twilight' of a community, collective memory can be rediscovered and reinvigorated through the process of mourning (54). Mourning is a strangely productive process, particularly for a queer community that did not always have the freedom to mourn its dead publicly.

McGregor's novel features another kind of nostalgia; a radical queer nostalgia, which is distinct from mainstream gay and lesbian nostalgias. This is expressed in statements made by characters communicating a longing for the 'outlaw' status of queer people in the 1970s and early 1980s, which initiated cultural radicalism. In his monologue, James says: 'Still there was something about the street back then ... There was something more special about being gay when it was illegal, though it's probably very politically incorrect to say so' (86). This is essentially nostalgia for the time in which homophobia and oppression made radicalism beneficial, even necessary for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. While these conditions made life difficult for queer people, they also facilitated strong community affiliations and bred a culture of resistance to oppression. Radical queer nostalgia is not nostalgia for the *conditions* which bred radicalism, but nostalgia for the community spirit and sense of collective struggle and solidarity that manifested under those conditions. Increasing social and political acceptance of queer lifestyles and identities has resulted in a slow de-radicalising of previously marginalised queer communities, and other markers of identity, such as class, race and religion, now compete with 'queerness' as prime identifiers. It is these changes that James mourns.

McGregor's *chemical palace* is testament to the potential role of literary nostalgia in creating a communal discourse and recording a communal history. Sacks identifies in elegy a struggle against the 'deathlike loss of identity' that can be associated with the dissolution of a community (17). Expressions of restorative nostalgia in literature are part of a healthy practice of mourning that attempts to understand the past in order to inform the present and future. In queer texts nostalgia almost always appears when there is a sense that something communal has been lost. In the case of *chemical palace* it is the movement from a lifestyle that is collective to one that is more individualised. This kind of nostalgia is common in the gay community more broadly, where older queers bemoan the commercialisation and alienation they perceive in today's Mardi Gras parties:

The discourse and sensation of community, which was initially and ecstatically embodied at these events against the terrible backdrop of the AIDS crisis, has come back in an intense but barely recognized form: a nostalgic and displaced memory of community, haunting and obfuscating the Mardi Gras post-mortem. The complaints of commercialisation and alienation that pervaded this discourse are the mourned trace of the intense relationality whose fabrication was necessary to address the crisis. (Race 29)

Race's analysis is valuable for understanding the impact of restorative nostalgia in queer communities, but it is also a view held mostly by those who were involved in the early days of

Mardi Gras. Many participants in contemporary Mardi Gras parades and parties report experiencing a profound sense of being part of something meaningful, particularly people who are attending their first Mardi Gras. These people are usually young and often from rural or outer-suburban areas, and for them the loud, proud, public presence of so many queer people creates strong feelings of celebration and affiliation. Perhaps one aspect of queer nostalgia is a nostalgia for youth, for the time when things felt new and felt exciting. It is common to encounter a romanticisation of the past and a revisionist nostalgia for a 'golden age' of queer partying, but the nostalgia of *chemical palace* bears little resemblance to that expressed by revisionists who complain about today's parties, yearning for the intensified experience of the mainstream gay parties in their heyday. The radical club culture of *chemical palace* is self-made and DIY, and the novel promotes the view that you must create culture yourself to keep it fresh and exciting. The nostalgia of *chemical palace* is not a regressive or sentimental nostalgia, but an active, critical and politicised nostalgia.

Is The Chemical Palace a ruin?

Implicit in the claim that the novel is an elegy for the demise of the scene in 1990s is the assumption that radical queer culture of the kind in *chemical palace* is dead. *Is The Chemical Palace a ruin?* Does McGregor's novel in fact function as a eulogy for the unique and vibrant club culture that it describes? Is this culture – its ethos, aesthetics and conventions – relegated to the realm of Australian history, or has it continued into the late 2000s? There is certainly a feeling among people who were active in radical queer culture when it was at its peak in the 1990s that it has slowed down. However, it would be wrong to suggest that this culture is dead. Trash Vaudeville reveals that: 'The nineties seemed to be a time when the images of subcultures were constantly being unearthed and presented to the world' (Int. n. pag.). This *freshness* may no longer characterise the scene, but the cultural phenomenon of radical queer dance party culture continues. I do not claim that contemporary manifestations are the same as those described in the novel, or that the culture is as active, radical or vibrant as it once was. However, dance parties that conform to the radical queer ethos and aesthetic still occur, even if they have lost some of their more radical elements, particularly in the area of performance. In the face of conservatisation and restriction, the culture has evolved. While it is not possible in this project to describe the multitude of contemporary manifestations of radical queer culture in vast detail, the examples of Club Kooky, Gurlesque and *Slit Magazine* demonstrate that aspects of the culture recorded in *chemical palace* are still active today. The Chemical Palace is *not* a ruin.

An exceptional case study for the continuation of radical queer party culture, as well as the changes and challenges that have faced it, is Klub Kooky, which was officially started in 1996 by Sydney DJs Gemma and Seymour Butz:

Once upon a time in the 1990s a hairy little gay lad met a cuddly lezzo and bonded over their love of freaky music and colourful people. together, they created a off the strip weekly party to share these tunes, with little bands and wierdo performers with their friends. ... this place was called club kooky.... so many bands and performers have come and shared their special talents. but the real magic is in you people who come and dance, prance, dress up, make out and create a unique special energy time and again. kooky is more than a night out, we are a community and a movement. (*Klub Kooky Myspace Blog* n. pag.)

Kooky has gone through different manifestations at numerous venues, including its original home, Club 77 on William Street in Sydney's Kings Cross. Disagreements with venue owners

and funding issues saw the event change locations over the years, taking place at Club 77, the Imperial Hotel in Erskineville and, at its recent venue, Herman's Bar at the University of Sydney. Kooky has been a staple of the radical queer community for years, providing a space where participants can wear anything (the brighter and more eccentric the better), listen and dance to alternative, progressive and underground music styles, experiment with drugs and hang out with a diverse crowd. The club prides itself on offering an inclusive space without the 'snobbishness' the organisers associate with many clubs in the Oxford Street area. Like the parties in *chemical palace*, Kooky is also a distinctly queer space – not gay or straight, but *bent*. Jon Hewitt (2008) says:

Kooky fast became a haven for club kids wanting a venue where they could mash up their clubbing experience through fashion, haphazard dance moves and the opportunity to see up-and-coming performers in a 'tude-free room.... While cookie cutters were hard at work pressing out 'classic' gay nights along Oxford Street's various clubs, Butz and Gemma worked under the radar, concocting a weekly event which birthed it's [sic] own culture. (n.pag)

Kooky's organisers seek to involve members of the community in performances, art shows and themed events where participants can dress-up and express themselves. Kooky has featured bands and performers who are now well-known in Australia, including BifTek, Itchy and Scratchy, The Presets, Coda, Blush Foundation, Paul Mac and Wolfmother (Hewitt n.pag.). Kooky's organisers have always prioritised promoting and featuring local alternative acts. The long-standing popularity of Kooky can be attributed to the fact that it has always been accessible, cheap and devoted to a radical ethos.

Another regular party event that contributes to keeping radical queer culture alive is Gurlesque. Gurlesque is a semi-regular lesbian stripping night, open only to female and transsexual audience members. Started in the year 2000 by radical burlesque performers Sex Intents and Glita Supernova, Gurlesque offers a unique opportunity for women in the community to perform in a supportive environment. Gurlesque performances are widely varied because the organisers invite open community participation. Shows at Gurlesque often feature camp and grotesque aesthetics, referencing the radical performance culture of the 1990s. An advertisement in *Lesbians On The Loose* (2009) for Gurlesque at Herman's Bar, University of Sydney, reads:

Gurlesque encourages all women and trannies to get up on the stage and express themselves. The stage is there to confront fears and insecurities of what is deemed socially sexable in the world, to challenge sexual and social taboos, and to explode myths about what a patriarchal society dictates is sexy or attractive. ... Gurlesque is an environment for women and trans of all sexualities, body types and ages to explore their inner archetypes, let go, and have fun with like-minded people. (n. pag.)

Gurlesque promotes a positive body-image regardless of size, shape, race or disability, and a sex-positive approach to female sexuality. The organisers actively encourage any member of the community to perform, even including a section during the night where they invite a member of the audience onto the stage for an impromptu strip performance. Like the events in *chemical palace*, Gurlesque helps to build networks of performers, DJs, artists and connoisseurs of radical queer culture. These networks are then utilised for promoting related events such as *Shot with Desire* (2007), which featured Gurlesque performers but was also open to male performers. Other party events with a radical queer ethos that have occurred in Sydney during the 2000s include: No Holes Barred, Inquisition, Hellfire, Underbear parties, Bad Dog, Lesbitronica, Rubberball, and many more.

In addition to party events, there are contemporary artistic and cultural endeavours that take inspiration from the cultural production of the 1990s. In the tradition of *Wicked Women* comes *Slit Magazine*, edited in Sydney by Domino and Stealth. The magazine was launched in 2002 with its 'Kings' issue, which was followed later that year by 'Vamp'. Each issue is loosely themed to encourage the creativity of local photographers, writers, artists and exhibitionists, who are invited to submit work for publication in the glossy full colour periodical. 'Kings' contains a smorgasbord of material, including: creative pornographic images made by local artists, interviews with gender-illusionist (genderfuck) performers, a historical review describing how women in the 1900s 'passed' as men in order to live queer lives, a calendar of up-coming radical queer events, vox pops on lesbian sexuality, and an assortment of poems and stories. The editors even re-printed a story from *Wicked Women* (1.9), creating an unmistakable link with the radical sex culture of 1990s. *Slit's* very first editorial communicates the editors' progressive politicised vision for the magazine:

... and we are interested in considering the possibilities of creating a dialogue of sex and sexuality which is non commodified and which takes back control over our bodies and desires rather than prescribing them. 'cause we are trying to figure out how to find axis of liberation, cracks in the structure of capital, autonomous enclaves where we practice an economy of desire rather than capital. (Stealth and Domino 'Kings' 3)

While clearly promoting a radical agenda, the editors of *Slit* are not prescriptive about what this means; they publish a wide variety of material that represents a broad cross-section of opinions on sexuality, lifestyle and politics. What makes *Slit* even more closely related to the culture described in *chemical palace* is that the editors also host events, building strong communities around the publication and networking with likeminded people. The editors of *Slit* convene regular launch parties with performances and art exhibitions, providing members of the community with an opportunity to meet and exchange ideas. *Slit's* website tells readers:

... slit is a non profit mag where no one gets paid except the printers. part of the idea behind slit is to create and support dyke culture in print and out and about, and so we see gigs as totally essential in creating a sense of community and excitement. (Domino and Stealth n.pag.)

Kooky and *Slit* demonstrate the continuation of radical queer culture into the late 2000s. These events are similar to the phenomena described in McGregor's novel, and even engage participants and organisers who were involved in the 1990s. These two examples are also interesting because of their longevity, which has allowed them to fulfil a primary role in creating and maintaining radical queer culture. There is perhaps less of a lifestyle associated with radical queer culture in its current form, but the culture still exists. Clubs like Kooky still thrive and draw crowds, and alternative Mardi Gras parties are organised in major Australian cities every year. If radical queer culture has not perished, why does McGregor mourn it? How much of the nostalgia that pervades the novel is actually due to concrete change in the scene? During her talk at *Mixing the Lit* (2004), McGregor posed this question herself; freely acknowledging that radical queer culture had evolved. There is no doubt that changes in our social and political landscape have impacted on *The Chemical Palace*, and particularly on the sustainability of the lifestyle that *chemical palace* documents, but there is also no doubt that radical queer culture has survived and evolved, and continues to make its mark on Sydney's nightlife.

Epilogue: after the carnival

She thought about Bee asking her to perform, all her little victories all her little failures. She thought about Roger saying gay was now mainstream and Fred saying women were now pretty much equal. She thought about all those glib cosmological predictions, that one day soon there would be no wars, no racism no sexism no homophobia. That the apocalypse would come with massive earth quakes and tidal waves, that there would be a nuclear holocaust, no coastline as we know it, no forests rivers, no Antarctica. That one day soon there would be no religion, that there would be a spiritual renaissance. That soon there would be no books, that everybody would own a PC. (*chemical* 356)

These words towards the end of *chemical palace* are paradoxical: they inspire us to question what's possible, and what's probable. If the idea of everyone owning a PC was improbable in the late 1990s and early 2000s, then perhaps the foretold demise of 'rivers' and 'coastlines' may also come to pass... Then again, perhaps these 'glib cosmological predictions' serve as a metaphor for the way in which Australian culture and society has changed in the last two decades. Coming to the end of my exploration of McGregor's novel has inspired me to (re)consider the all-important question of context. I began my study of *chemical palace* in 2004, just two years after its publication and three years before the end of the Howard Government's reign over Australian society. Things have changed in this country, and yet much remains the same. As I conclude this foray into mapping the intensities and connections of *chemical palace* it is August 2010 and we have just witnessed the 2010 Federal Election campaign, in which a saturation of banal media coverage pitted the Coalition's Tony Abbott against Labor's Julia Gillard, as if the choice on August 21st 2010 was as simple as picking between two individuals. Even in our increasingly presidential political system the significance of Australia's first female Prime Minister has been disappointingly-registered by a seemingly unmoved mainstream. A blip of excitement followed by months of mundane discussion around 'authenticity' (who is the 'real Julia?') and fashion (Tony's infamous 'budgie smugglers' and Julia's greying 'regrowth'). Somewhat light on policy, the 2010 federal election campaign featured 'copycat' promises by both parties to move refugee processing off-shore, apparently appealing to an undercurrent of fear and protectionism that has remained relatively quiet since the Howard Government was ousted in 2007. While the bookmakers of Australia predicted that the Australian Labor Party would hold onto Government by a small margin, neither side had cause for confidence, and the result – a 'hung-parliament' – suggests that Australians are simply under-whelmed and confused about the direction of our nation. In this context, McGregor has recently released her new novel, *Indelible Ink* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2010). It is a mature and sophisticated work of fiction in which the lead character, a grandmother from 'Sydney's affluent north shore', gets a tattoo on a drunken whim, leading to major transformation and tension with her children (back cover). Christos Tsiolkas praises McGregor's character development in the book, claiming that she is 'undeniably now – one of our finest writers' (cover). There is something to be said about that word, 'now': Tsiolkas is subtly referring to McGregor's development as a writer, and the supposed 'coming of age' of her work. As the novel is read by more and more critics and commentators, I have no doubt that this sentiment will be echoed. I also predict that the new novel will sell more copies than *chemical palace* and enjoy a broader general appeal – but why? Certainly *Indelible Ink* demonstrates more obvious philosophical maturity and consistency of stylistic control (Williamson 72) than *chemical palace*, but does that make it a 'better' book? What has been lost in the spaces between these two texts, and the time periods they represent? What transformation has Australia witnessed in the interim? If both books

paint a picture of Australian life and culture, why is one picture clearer to readers than the other? And what portion of the joy and energy that infuse *chemical palace* remains in the author's voice?

Howard's legacy

McGregor wrote *chemical palace* under the cloud of 'John Howard's Australia'. The election of Howard and his Coalition Government in 1996 was the beginning of the end for the popular emphasis on 'multiculturalism' and 'political correctness' of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Guy Rundle (2001) exposes the return to the 'very dark corners' of the nation's imagining that was encouraged by Howard over the 'Tampa' incident:

For those who support his courageous stand against the coming hordes on behalf of the battlers, the *Tampa* image summons up all they fear and hate about the erosion of an older Australia. The wandering winds of *Tampa* talk back blew into some very dark corners of the Australian psyche, and Howard's emphasis on our 'soil' and how he would prevent its contamination by Afghan feet fanned those winds. (6)

Encouraged by a new nationalistic leader, Australians who had been quietly going along with the agenda of globalisation and multicultural harmony began to speak out. They didn't want Asians 'coming in droves' and bringing their values and languages with them. They loved *their country* and wanted to 'prevent its contamination' (Rundle 6). Suddenly those with conservative and fixed ideas of what it meant 'to be Australian' found their views in agreement with the Government of the day. Then, at the time of the September 11 terrorist attacks in the USA (2001), hatred and fear of the 'Asian hordes' swung suddenly against Muslims and Arabs. Mark Beeson (2005) exposes the irony inherent in the 'new' approach to terrorism that characterised the Australian response to real or imagined threats from abroad in the 2000s:

Remarkably enough, the Howard government's security policies continue to reflect the same underlying logic as Hobbes' three and half centuries earlier: the world is a potentially hostile place and security is best achieved by close alignment with the hegemon. (14)

It was in the Howard Government's interests to promote the idea that the world was a 'hostile place' and that Australians needed a 'tough' and 'strong' leader to protect them. So the flames of paranoia were fanned and this affected the lives of many Australians in tangible ways. For some Muslim men and women it meant facing racism and xenophobia on an almost daily basis. One way in which it affected McGregor's life and the lives of her contemporaries was in the increased social conservatism that saw anyone who did not conform to the capitalist hegemony labelled 'unAustralian'. It was common for Governments in the years after September 11 to use national security as justification for passing laws that restricted public space and increased surveillance over the local population. It was a 'dark time', as Susan Varga articulates, but:

One of the pluses of living through dark times is that people get angry; they are stirred to put pen to paper, begin email campaigns, to get out on the streets. They write books. They try to make change. (173)

In her book, McGregor rails against these impositions, refusing to be drawn into the idea that personal freedom should fall victim to the faceless fear of an abstract noun ('the war against *terror*'). Many people *were* drawn in to this logic, and despite a drop in the popularity of the Howard Government, in 2001 'the bullying of a boatload of stateless people ... allowed him the chance to retain power' (Rundle 12).

The characters in *chemical palace* denounce the hypocrisies of this xenophobic nationalism through their performance and art, while struggling with real increases in the cost of living and changes to the national welfare system. In 'Reconstituting the Public as the Private: John Howard on the Welfare State' (2000), Mendes critically analyses Howard's neo-liberal approach to the unemployed and those on welfare benefits: 'As Prime Minister, Howard has initiated a number of anti-dole fraud campaigns clearly designed to discipline the undeserving poor' (37). In addition to pumping funds into surveillance of welfare recipients, Howard changed the 'Age of Independence' for Youth Allowance eligibility from 21 to 25 years for full-time students, regularly suggesting that the best form of welfare was the family. Mendes exposes the crux of Howard's approach to welfare which saw the system redesigned 'to reinforce so-called mainstream social values, and punish those who refuse to conform' (37). This was a stifling time to be queer and leftwing; it was a time in which the agenda of multinationals, power and 'big business' appeared to eclipse all that was local and communal, yet this neo-liberal free-market worship sat – paradoxically – beside a tyranny of nationalist rhetoric and old-fashioned concepts of 'battlers' and 'mateship' (Rundle 6, 11). Mendes summarises:

John Howard's beliefs represent a synthesis of classical liberal and social conservative tendencies. He favours the free market over state intervention, and adheres to core beliefs in the family, personal responsibility, and self-reliance. (44)

But this approach is only applied to the market: money is free to move around the world, while the movement of people is increasingly restricted. Rundle claims that in pursuit of winning the 2001 election the Howard Government 'summon[ed] up the worst side of the Australian spirit' (7). Howard spoke out against multiculturalism and so called 'political correctness', and the Coalition's party line on Asian immigration was largely the same as One Nation's; that it should be slowed to avoid Australia being culturally 'swamped' (Rundle 8). However, while Howard was trumpeting the concepts of 'mateship' and 'egalitarianism' he was 'presiding over a widening of social divisions, both of outcome and opportunity' (11). McGregor and her contemporaries were powerless as their freedoms were restricted, their leisure activities were heavily-policed and publicly-demonised, the cost of living in Sydney became prohibitive, and the definition of 'a *real* Australian' became increasingly narrow.

In this context, McGregor's novel is an offering; a purging; a great leap of faith. It is a text written out of a sense of need – an *urge* – the need to rally resistance under the darkening sky of the Howard era. According to the author, those things that were good and worthwhile about the inner-city and its communities are being sold-off, killed-off or squashed, as represented by the drawn-out mourning process of the group of friends for their warehouse, which is sold to a developer, ending their way of life. Queers who fought for recognition and equality in the 1970s and 1980s were now fighting to retain their ghettos in Darlinghurst and Paddington, as well as to retain some control over their social spaces and their right to dress and perform as they like in them. Readers can perceive in *chemical palace* the urgent desire to articulate this story – the need; the lust in the writing. McGregor communicates this sense of urgency at numerous points in the novel, such as in the name given to the group's final party, *Fast*: 'because... time's running out' (337). Her characters express their resistance to the changing social landscape in the best way they know; through performance. This performance at *Fast* captures the frustration and cynicism of the group against the tyranny of the Government's approach to asylum seekers, as expressed in Howard's Election Launch Policy Speech on October 28, 2001:

Nice musak was drifting through the speakers, the red plastic strips were lifted then Turkish Jim's new boyfriend William hung a sign over the kitchen doorway.

LIPOSUCTION CLINIC. Jim in a long white coat brought out an effigy and sat it on a chair below the sign. Weedy little body, perfectly caricatured oversized head lolling like a giant watermelon behind its giant glasses. It was the Prime Minister. The heckling began almost immediately. Shoosh, Jim admonished. He's having his treatment. As snippets of the Prime Minister's speeches began to lace the soundtrack Jim took a length of clear plastic tubing, attached one end to the Prime Minister's ear the other to a perspex vat on the table adjacent. Other sounds were creeping into the soundtrack now, the speeches distorted, the national anthem the United States national anthem, a woman saying Oh John! and as Jim began to pump, the sounds of sludge and groaning machinery. William held the head in place while Turkish Jim pumped a thick translucent yellowy red matter slowly from it down the tube and into the vat. *We* decide who comes into this country *we* decide who enters this country *we* decidiediediedie enter this cunt enters this cunt, the glasses falling to the floor long black and grey tendrils of eyebrows poking bravely through the Prime Minister's skin as he warped and wrinkled and the vat filled with pus, we will not tolerate illegal illegal, his speech crescendoing to a high rapid babel not toleratenotolerate till the head shrank to the size of a human's then slumped forward over the little body. (341)

The snippets of vocalisation in this performance are taken directly from the Policy speech, where Howard's infamous and much-quoted attack on 'boat people' was a prime feature. In this sermon Howard promised to be 'tough on drugs', reduce 'welfare dependency' by providing 'incentives to work', and protect Australia from 'illegal immigrants' by 'having an uncompromising view about the fundamental right of this country to protect its borders' (n. pag). The distortion of Howard's voice in the performance exposes the dangers of rhetoric, which can be cleverly used to disguise hatred and ignorance, and the abject image of pus seeping from his head is designed to expose the ugliness of such policies. The pus being drained from the Prime Minister's grotesquely oversized head is a fulfilment of fantasy and an expression of power in the context of powerlessness.

The urge

Not realising when I began the book – 1997 – how much and fast things could regress, this [creating a memoir] wasn't my original intention. But with hindsight I wanted the book to be regarded as a memory of those times, a valid historical document. ... Of course when you take risks you're bound to fall on your face, even if you also fly. (McGregor Int. 1.)

McGregor's *chemical palace* is a book that wanted to be written; a truly self-exposing text. It is a book that captures the transition from the exuberance, honesty and wonderful naivety of youth to the measured subtlety of maturity. It is also a book that reads differently every time, depending on context and what the reader is looking for. There's so much in McGregor's text that to attempt to summarise it seems rude. The notion of 'conclusion' is a false and artificial concept, especially in reference to *chemical palace*. As the author insists in her presentation of the last two pages of the novel, there is no ending to speak of. The radical queer scene does not die, it merely evolves; the characters' use of drugs does not suddenly cease, it also evolves. Those with disease do not die in a dramatic and satisfying climax, nor does the struggle of youth and radicalism win or lose against the encroaching monotony of neo-liberal social conservatism. McGregor's writing and politics have evolved, but not to the point where she would renounce the passionate rebellions of her past. I *too* have changed while completing this project, but not so much as to forget why I had to start it.

In mapping the intensities and connections of *chemical palace* I have looked at its role as a minor literature and the question of queer writing. I have also demonstrated that the book is infinitely too complicated to classify so neatly, by exposing its engagement with nostalgia, and the issues of death and endings, change and constancy. Why does an author write such a book? Why do I care to interpret it? What is this passionate desire to share our perspectives; to explain; to help people understand where we come from? McGregor herself struggles to name her motivations: 'Folly. Ambition. Just an uncontrollable urge really' (Int. 1.). This urge is captured in the urgency of the novel, which is as extraordinary for its naivety as its sophistication:

I know intimately that the worst novels ever written took more fearlessness, will and soul than the best book reviews ever written. (Davis n.pag)

McGregor's *chemical palace* exhibits immense 'will and soul'. We may criticise the novel's over-enthusiasm and its sometimes uncomfortably-confessional style, but we should also recognise the universality of McGregor's approach. McGregor appeals to readers to understand that:

A writer's cultural identity is crucial. Roots and region are an essential part of his or her work, and 'the serious fiction writer always writes about the whole world, no matter how limited his particular scene'. ('Lesbian' 39)

If *chemical palace* challenges some readers to see beauty in images that confront them, then it has achieved one of its aims; to communicate that universal human tendencies express themselves in a various and marvellous multiplicity. Perhaps a majority of readers aren't ready to see the beauty in an anal-fisting scene, or to understand the relaxing intimacy of a needle-play session – readers titillate at such scenes rather than seeing them as existent, *normal* life for those involved. However, the book was short-listed for Premier's Award in 2002, suggesting that, however slow, change *is* happening.

In writing and publishing *chemical palace* it is obvious that McGregor has taken that great leap of faith, appealing to readers to understand something that may be alien to their worldview. She says:

Literary texts, with all their cultural markings, can and will speak for themselves. But the way in which they are heard is ultimately the reader's province. ('Lesbian' 39)

I am driven to wonder, can an author tell a story with characters from a minority identity group without immediately consigning their book to the 'special interest' shelf? Can an author like McGregor succeed in Australia without watering-down her *self*? Possibly. It depends on how you judge success, of course. Can a book like *chemical palace* overcome the forces that lead reviewers like Ley and Durber to mischaracterise or dismiss it? Possibly. These questions remain pertinent, but it is with an ambivalent sense of hope that I conclude this study. Minor literature remains minor while readers, critics and bookstore owners continue to classify books. Many readers will 'think outside the square' and see text outside of its box, but many will not. While some heterosexual readers will buy a 'gay book', many will not, regardless of its literary value. It is very difficult for the minor author to escape their pigeon-hole without first relinquishing the obvious signs and symbols of their minority identification; such as queer sex, drug-taking, or the overt political statement. Minor authors should be able to write the story of their tribe, while concurrently being read as a serious author. We must be flexible enough to understand that minority authors slip in and out of various hats – those of their communities, and those that suit them as a writer. In *chemical palace*, as I have demonstrated, McGregor is appealing to readers to allow her to wear both. She well understands that readers hear different tones in the same melody; all she asks is that readers do not drown-out her text with preconceptions and bias.

The ephemeral gesture

But people were like that. Egos. Measured everything against their own lifetime. Forgot about the insects and the stars, the shifting sands beneath their feet, forgot the intransigence of doctrine. Forgot most of all the significance of the ephemeral gesture, repeated, reinvented. Everlasting. (*chemical* 356-7)

In *chemical palace*, McGregor offered her whole self to the reader. It is a courageous text but it is also a text born of context. For many young people who were involved in radical queer culture in the early and mid 2000s, life under a Liberal Government was all they could remember, it their only reality. The toppling of the Republican Government in the United States and the election of Barack Obama, the first African-American US President, was an inspiring event for radicals in Australia. Then the election of Kevin Rudd's Labor Government in 2007 provided further hope to those who had lost faith in the political process. Now, in 2010, it is interesting to think about what has changed. I have changed and McGregor has changed: I now work for the Government I used to protest against, and McGregor's new book has a wealthy, heterosexual main character, but these things do not indicate capitulation to the mainstream, or a shift to the right, they simply demonstrate a complexity of character that always already existed in us both. The Australian political landscape may have changed with the election of the Rudd Government and the powerful shared experience of The Apology to the Stolen Generations, but some things have not changed at all. Young people still migrate to the cities seeking adventure; radical queers still use costume, performance and fantasy to critique the status quo; and strippers and mistresses still work in the cities, bringing a little of that fantasy to the lives of everyday men. McGregor offered her second novel in 2002 as an antidote to the sanitising of culture, human interactions, performance and art. In it she hoped to portray a fleeting historical moment while also capturing the ephemeral spirituality of the intransigent. Davidson elucidates that:

Chemical Palace implicitly offers itself as a record of this ephemerality, translating the value of the fugitive moment into the comparatively permanent register of the printed word. (145)

Driven by a mixture of need, desire and responsibility, McGregor records not only the fugitive resistance of the radical queer scene in the 1990s, but the vibrancy and joy of fugitive resistance.

Why does this matter? It matters regardless of who takes office after Federal Elections, because the Australian Labor Party becomes more like the Liberal Party each time they go to the polls, and because Howard is not the only politician who acts as 'a servant of the corporate world and its aim of extending itself into every corner of contemporary life' (Rundle 16). While we may question the leaders during every election campaign, few challenge the rationale of free-market capitalism, and few question justifications used for the surveillance and control that extends into almost every facet of our lives. In a press conference at the National Press Club on 17th August 2010, Tony Abbott said 'I believe in the free market. I believe in private enterprise above all else', and no one batted an eyelid. This is the world in which McGregor and I find ourselves, and so, driven to capture a snapshot of Sydney's queer ghettos in a time when spontaneous street parties were still possible and you could still buy drugs over the counter at hamburger shops on Oxford Street, McGregor constructed *chemical palace* – a fiercely honest, unashamedly enthusiastic account of a time that has past. But why discuss it? What is *my* purpose? Is it simply that as a participant in radical queer scenes myself I wished to justify them? To explain that radical queer communities have the same loyalties and economies of care as any? Do I only desire to make people see beyond stereotypes and

preconceptions? Or to help them understand that there is far more in McGregor's text than the particular concerns of a minority group? Yes... and no. I wrote this thesis for the same reason McGregor wrote her novel; I have experienced something profound and I wanted to express it. I can now fully comprehend Davis' words – 'the worst novels ever written took more fearlessness, will and soul than the best book reviews ever written' – express an important truth in literary criticism. Regardless of whether we agree with McGregor's political views, or appreciate her attempts to use language in service of creating a minor text, there is hope that we may take from her writing what she wishes us to take:

Questions about our times and how we live. Insights, laughter, recognition, challenges. A sense of having lived somewhere, with certain people, for a time, and of having been changed through that, even if only subtly. (*Booktopia* n. pag.)

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1. What would you say the Chemical Palace is / or was?

A dream realm. A make-believe place where an array of people uncomfortable in the mainstream can get together and celebrate.

The literal answer is that it is the name of a dance tape mixed for me by Lanny K, one of the DJs I worked with for many years. Lanny made 'chemical palace' for me after the first dance party that I produced with Julie Callaghan, Waded (then called Bernice Neyland) and Melinda Dimitriades. That party was called 'Fanny Palace' and took place at Byblos on Oxford st in November 1995. We did a few more Fanny Palaces over the years, although Melinda dropped out of the team, followed by Julie - so the last Fanny Palace was a series of weekly clubs run by Waded and I at Icebox on Kellet st in early 1998..

We meant 'Fanny' in the american sense (shoot me) - ie, tush. Posterior. In the unisex sense. They were very theatrical parties, very dirty as well, and very mixed.

I still listen to the original 'chemical palace' now and then. It's moody, deep, dark house, a bit trancey, hardly any vocals.

'chemical' in the title was also a reference to the most elemental life forms. To the primal, essential.

2. Would you say that your connection with Sydney and your love of the city is tied to having been a part of the culture you describe in chemical palace? Was/is being a part of that culture of creativity and transcendence a factor in your deepening dedication to Sydney as subject in your writing?

Most definitely. Because I don't really love the city now as I did then - the stainless steel pine finish real estate that it is now, I mean. I am committed to writing about Sydney for the indefinite future, but as we're in a phase I so intensely dislike in so many ways, my feelings for the city have become complicated. I'm committed, I think, from a sense of destiny, cultural custodianship, responsibility if you like. My next novel will be a much more dystopic view. My connection to Sydney is very much tied up with growing up on the harbour, living by the ocean. The water stuff.

3. Are you familiar with Bakhtin's writing on Rabelais and the Carnavalesque? Would you say that a similar kind of thing is represented by the events discussed in CP? By which I mean, do you think that dance party culture is a kind of festival experience? One where hierarchies and distance between people can be broken down for example? A unique space, where joy and community are the priority?

No, but I really have to read him as about three million people have mentioned him to me. I am flattered to think I may have imbibed him in my sleep and spat his ethos back out in my writing ...

I fully agree with all these definitions of dance party culture. However, there's a sceptic nagging in the back of my mind ... it is an idealised view of dance party culture. It's what it CAN be, not what it often ends up as - something sadly plastic and banal ...

4. Where do you think 'the grotesque' flavour in these performances and costumes comes from? I am thinking of images you have created like the Green Woman with her varicose veins. etc. As well as the performances related to genitalia, especially the extending penis? Was the imagery inspired by anything in particular?

My mentors in costumes were the Sodom Circus to whom the book is dedicated. Almost all the people thanked in the back of the book showed me something amazing with costuming.

In my party life at that time - as reflected in chemical palace - the prevalence of the grotesque was a fairly simple case of accessing your dark side. It was a reaction against the pretty boy culture that was so dominant - at this time Gay Culture was at its peak, and the peak was generally Pretty Boy. Sydney in general was fast-tracking to a Body Beautiful ethos, and we wanted to give that the big finger. It was also no doubt influenced by the literally grotesque depredations we had seen our friends go through as they died of AIDS.

Inspiration for the images and costumes in the book ... let me see ... an overactive imagination and very limited abilities made me go to town with the costumes and performances. I figured that what I couldn't do in actual life, I could do in fiction.

there are a handful of looks and shows that were inspired by real life, but I'd have to go through and check - I think there's one that one of the girls wears which involves a sheep's heart and computer wiring ... ? Which was created by Julie Callaghan ...

The Green Woman is of course about Envy and Materialism. She is a shopaholic. She is also a genre in costume/performance, wherein the visible skin of face and hands is covered as well - with paint or fabric - so the masking is total, although the features remain defined.

At the time of our parties - (when I say 'our' I include the Sodom Circus who produced the Homo Eclectus parties, where Ana and I performed) - we all discovered Leigh Bowery. it was like the Heavens opening. Here was someone doing what we were, and making an international art career out of it.

From the Sodom gang Peter Schouthen, Raven, Lance Cunynghame were the most gifted and extreme of the costume makers. The names you are more likely to know are Peter Tully, David McDiarmid and Brenton Heath-Kerr - all Sydney boys now dead who were very active in the 80s and 90s. Simon Reptile also. Brenton did an extraordinary walk through the 'Art in the Age of AIDS' exhibition at the National Gallery where he was in a full body-hugging latex costume that mimicked his decaying body. He looked fabulously grotesque, he was wheeling a drip, apparently the blue-bloods freaked. He is one of Australia's best artists of the late twentieth century, I think.

Boys tended to be stronger at costumes, girls at performance. For instance, the genitalia stuff would be more likely to have come from a woman's mind. The usual reasons of penis envy and cunt reclamation etcetc. The girls were less shy with their bodies - I think this remains true

- this female dominance is what provoked Man Jam. The main women who influenced me were Groovii Biscuits, Sex and Glita. There were many great one-offs as well. Artists like Christa Hughes introduced more traditional cabaret elements.

Also, there seems to be some strong references to Berlin cabaret, and 1920's gothic imagery. Are these inspirations of yours at all?

Yes, I've always related strongly to Weimar Germany. But I wonder sometimes about my superficial take on it ... one documentary mentioned a club exclusively patronised by older men in military regalia, who bought young boys in the club. If that sort of club was happening next door to my parties in 90s Sydney, I would have written a very different novel!! Sydney seems tame in comparison. A fundamental difference is that we weren't poverty stricken. In chemical palace, you'll notice how straight some people's day jobs are - computers, medical. The anti-consumerist attitude is complicated by that. The satire is often self-reflective. traffic is a poor artist, as is Slip. But most of the others are safely waged.

The inter-war period is a particular fascination of mine in terms of other places as well - the USA - for african american music - jazz, blues, etc; motion pictures taking off, Busby Berkely showing how political camp could be.

Also in terms of Sydney at that time - Sly grog.

You have a whole range of volatile ingredients at play - mass migration due to political upheaval, pogroms, fascism and communism at the helm, the explosion of the pharmacopia into popular use; emancipation of women, etc, and as you point out in your essay an amount of queer identity consciousness if not activism. I don't know how much of these elements can be found in late 20th century sydney. Both were decadent times - both involved extremes of sexual liberation - both were bookended by conservative and militaristic times. Is that simplistic?

I think the 80s and 90s were more liberated than the 70s because queers and women got a lot more out of these times, as did kinksters. Another similarity is the political emphasis - even more than just politics, pretty much everything was reflected on the party stage. For instance, you would see a performance about boat people following Tampa. The night before a federal election, Pluto did a very heavy one with his lips sewn together and a swastika sewn on his chest. Or Lance C turning up to a party shortly after versace's death in grotesque Donatella drag, carrying an urn that held her brother's ashes. I received more incisive social commentary at parties than I did in newspapers in this era. (but that might say more about me than the era ...)

5. CP discusses the changes in venues and club culture (Pokies, less live music and dj's, etc, such as on page 255) but also the changes in geography and society in inner-city Sydney and the inner-west in general. What do you think it was about the 80's and 90's that caused these changes to occur at that time?

Gee ... gentrification seems to be universal. The western world seems to be richer, and much of the eastern is catching up. Sydney has grown, and become more self-conscious. It's an ambitious city, never really sure of its place in the wider world, always on the make. We are more litigious - more Americanised - hence the tightening of insurance and public health and safety regs which have really hampered what you can do in a venue - from playing music, through decorating, even dancing in a bar like the oxford downstairs is now illegal. Specifically, NSW Licencing Laws have always been notoriously draconian. The world is more corporate in general. more preoccupied with personal wealth and personal space, than communal. And of course the all-pervasive climate of fear and conservatism that began in the 90s. S11 fanned that spark into an inferno.

6. You describe your writing style in cp as aleatoric – this is wonderful as it relates to both chance (the throw of a dice) and to improvised music. Would you say that this style is organic? How do you think it compliments the subject matter of cp?

Yes.

I started out as a saxophonist - from 16-21 played in bands. So I used that musical reference deliberately, as music influenced me as much if not more than literature - (although that has changed since chemical.) I cut my teeth on jazz, punk, rock, blues - loads of black music generally, experimental - freedom music I guess, aleatoric music. When I got into dance and electronica in the late 80s I found all those elements again. I think dance and electronica can be the most powerful folk music.

The style is organic, but it did have to be trained. a difficult and delicate process.

The story determines the style. In this case the story is more about the communal than the personal, so you have several narrative threads, and a barely dominant main character - traffic. The world depicted is a chaotic one wherein rules are constantly being broken. It's a world of shifting realities, because it's masquerade, and because it's chemically altered - so you have shifting voices and viewpoints. It's a circular world. All of that would be reflected in the style.

7. Chemical palace is a sophisticated literary work, and deserves to hold an important place in Australian literature, but it is also the only significant published work of literature documenting Sydney's radical queer club culture. Did you write it, in part for the community? And/or as a record of the unique cultural and historical moment it describes?

Both. I also write for myself - probably first and foremost. I also wanted the book to be read outside of the community - writing and publishing a book is an invitation to the entire world.

8. How did the HIV 'Crisis' impact upon the culture, atmosphere, costuming and performance of that time?

Some answers to this in #4 ...

Also, AIDS lent an edge to the parties. There was a feeling of triumph on the dancefloor - I'm Alive! That was bound up in politics, because AIDS was concurrent with the gaining of civil rights. A Seize the Day mentality can make things sweeter, more cherished, more desperate and ruthless.

In the privileged context of Sydney (or similar), there was a familiarity with death, illness, and tragedy that didn't exist in other communities, apart from the Aboriginal maybe. That was a powerful lesson about the ephemerality of all life, the ruthlessness of fate. That sort of context lends itself to ritual as cultural expression, rather than something solid and inert like architecture.

Most of the parties were fundraisers for AIDS. If you put on a party in the mid 90s without a portion of profits to AIDS charity you were frowned upon. So you had an interesting mix of the sincere and the politically correct.

9. Drugs are an important feature of the novel, but not as important as some critics and reviewers have suggested. What role do you think they played in the creation of these unique party spaces?

They were intrinsic. It was only rare individuals who never took them. Drugs have always been intrinsic to bacchanalia - whether wine, or acacia, or whatever your poison. They're part of the passage of letting go.

I tried to show a range of drug behaviours - addiction through recreational to abstention. Inside chemical palace is a conventional novel about drug addiction - traffic and speed (crystal at the end) - which probably would have been more commercially viable because it is exactly the story people expect from the context. But I couldn't leave it there all alone, it simply couldn't exist without all the other narratives running through and around.

I believe that (along with dance music) drug-experiences and the effects of drugs on the mind help to shape the novel's structure, and inspire the way memory is explored and represented. Would you agree?

Yes, but I can't remember ...

10. Chemical palace is an intensely personal book, following the stories of some characters intimately and passionately, but it also has a universal quality, and describes radical queer culture and community extremely well. Do you think the novel can be read as subjective record of the past, almost like a historical novel in some ways? (Particularly in the absence of much formal history of this scene.)

Yes, I hope so. I think I alluded to this in an earlier question. Not realising when I began the book - 1997 - how much and fast things could regress, this wasn't my original intention. But with hindsight I wanted the book to be regarded as a memory of those times, a valid historical document.

11. The characters of chemical palace all make statements about the scene, sexuality, the status quo, the inner-city, fashion and art – promoting in different ways freedom, self-

expression, tolerance, community and a generally anti-capitalist ethos. How do you feel about people seeing the novel (among other things) as a loose manifesto for radical queer culture?

I feel fine about it.

12. One of the chapters I am working on is called 'Life Lived at an Extreme'. (From a poem in *Wicked Women*: 'as if life is worth living only at an extreme'.) Chemical palace represents the urge to transcend the monotony of a conservative consumer lifestyle, and the striving to create something else, something better and more real, but also deals honestly and tenderly with the dangers (physical and emotional) that such a lifestyle can create. Holme's hibernation on the coast is a powerful contrast to the bright, busy action of the city. Do you think the novel explores the notion of inner-peace? And do you think that Sydney (and the drug scene, the ghetto, etc) can be a tough place?

Hhmm ... it's all relative ...

In a way it's a privilege to be able to make the choice to live at such an extreme. but this privilege is nothing compared to the privilege of bankers and lawyers ... of course when you take risks, you're bound to fall on your face, even if you also fly.

Holmes and Slip and later even traffic both go through their ascetic phases, which I think are necessary parts of the cycle.

Finally, I am using heaps of different sources for the thesis – articles about rave culture, books about Berlin cabaret, queer punk culture and left-wing camp, interviews with people who were involved in the 90's, *Wicked Women* and zines from the 80's to today, literature on Sydney's geography, drug, disease and sex-worker services resources and many more. But the major theories I am using so far are Bakhtin's notion of Carnavalesque spaces and culture, Kirk and others' writings on Menippean satire, and anti-capitalist articles on egalitarian, participatory social spaces. I also intend to claim that the novel demonstrates a unique relationship between work and play that is highly transgressive, and shows the positive role that drugs can play in a communal setting.

Sounds great. The work and play thing is FUNDAMENTAL.

Interview 2. Saturday, 21 July 2007 12:16:49 PM

Appendix 2.

1. What kind of involvement did you have in the scene in the 90s? And now?

Throughout the 90s I was a full-on party animal. I played as well as worked in the party context. I put on *Fanny Palace* - a queer theatrical party which had three incarnations at 2 different venues, and then was a weekly club. I've talked at length about FP so won't go on again here but if you need more details happy to provide.

Very early on I went to Mardi Gras - 89 and 90 I think. I marshalled and danced in *Go West* by the Pet shop Boys! Its' true! I lived in Melbourne 90-93 and in 93 produced a huge float representing Melbourne for the MG Parade. Ironically it's the most iconic and patriotic Melbourne specific thing to have been in the parade. At that stage Melbourne had only sent about one float up.

Then there were some girly clubs way back then - *Bitchin*, *On the Other Side*, the last of the *Wicked Events*. I produced a peep show at *Strut Yr Smut* - a girly but mixed party with loads

of shows and backroom and dancefloor - in 94 or 95.

I began performing with AnA Wojak in 1998. senVoodoo went on into the 21st century. We performed at Homo Eclectus parties, Inquisition, No Holes Barred, Gurlesque, Grunt, other places. senVoodoo moved into the gallery/theatre/sit specific realm a few years ago. I worked at the Oxford 96-97 as a cellar and kitchen hand. It was a drug pit. It was fun, but crazy and exhausting and rather bleak at times. Hard work, hard play. Downstairs was a very popular and very dirty recovery venue. I was one of many petty drug dealers, and using pretty much every day, but nothing in comparison to these dudes who'd take 13 Es in one weekend, shoot up an e or a gram in one go ... bleuh makes me feel ill now .. but I loved it then. I was a punter at Sex n Subculture, Jamie and Vanessas, Inquisition, Klub Kooky, Phoenix, Filth, Ffierce, Mash and went to bush doofs and raves as well sometimes. There were great techno parties back then. Hard core techno music has been traditionlly so neglected by Sydney queers. They were often small and just FURIOUS little haedbanging events, not theatrical or camp at all, they rarely had shows. They were great, very punk.

The Entertainment Licence came in during the 90s. This licence aimed to capitalise on the truntable and dancing craze. You suddenly had to pay tens of thousands of dollars extra in your licence if you had turntables, and you had to employ more security. Security became mandatory with turntables - meaning I couldn't book the Hollywood Hotel mid week early for a book launch, with turntables, unless I paid hundreds of dollars to security guards. It became illegal to dance in bars - like downstairs at the Oxford - where we had danced for literally decades. And that is why so many places ripped out their DJ booths and replaced them with video screens.

The entertainmant Licence - you could check with NSW Gov exactly what it's called and how it works - was a cultural killer, obviously. Already it has done something to live music. Now DJing got squashed as well. A few months ago a clause in the EL was relaxed, which opened the doors to live music in certain contexts. For instance, guitars in restaurants could be re-employed without this crippling fee. And now, I have just heard, they are relaxing another clause which is going to make it easier for people to run a venue with liquor and cabaret-style performance. It's been a great two months co-incidentally for underground performance, and we could be looking at bigger possibilities ahead, which is really exciting.

Now - yeah, I have been filming my mates the last couple of months at You Little stripper, 6 Quick Chicks, and Underbelly last Saturday at carriageworks which was a wide range of installation, site specific, spoken word, sound, etc, every kind of anomalous performative typ of art ... I am enjoying being behind the camera, because for literally about a decade I never had anyone to capture what I did. So much so much has been lost. It's such a terrific resource. I and senVoodoo haven't had any ideas for cabaret or party striptease style performance for some years. senVoodoo's next work will be art artspace August 17th 6.30pm so BE THERE. Then next year we present a performance installation at EAF in adelaide. Me and Ana are doing more of our other solo art these days, not the same working together when you're not lovers. The works we are presenting all date from ideas about 5 years old.

I am just a punter these days - an avid Bad Dogger, and I do Kooky and sometimes Phoenix. I get to Gurlesque about once a year ... And these one off nights that the Man Jam crew put on. That's about it. I'm happy to only go out every couple of months or so. I appreciate it more. My mind boggles at the once twice thrice weekly sorties of the 90s. And I don't just mean

drinks and clubs, I mean full-on parties and events. I've even given up smoking!!

2. What were queer nightclub culture, performance and costume like in the 90s?

Cripes mate, that's a big question. Where do I begin???

They were rich, wild and wacky. I think I've blabbed alot about this as well - but once again, if you need more, let me know - it's occurred to me lately that the fetish element was huge back then and is one of the things whose disappearance is really noticeable - especially in view of the current resurgence in cabaret style, and the strength of drag even in the downturn. Fetish was responsible for Inquisition of course, which for years was the last good mainstream party. Fetish was a huge influence all the way across into drag and cabaret culture, it bled outside what in other places can be very doctrinaire and cliquy and precious confines. The Sydney culture didn't respect serious S/M boundaries really - which was a good thing.

I guess that irreverence and fluidity are the main qualifiers. A heightened sense of theatre, and vulgarity. Also, ownership of the streets was pretty strong. With the Sodom Circus, the guys who put on HOmo Eclectus parties, we did private parties, in which we performed in the streets all across the inner-city. These progressive dinner parties started in the afternoon and roamed around Surrhy Hills, Darlo, all the way to Balmain through Lilyfield. The academy would call this sort of performance 'Interventions'.

Also, more venues, and venues that weren't so shiny and new, that had ghosts and patinas that added to the spirit of things ...

How have they changed?

There is just less, and less street action is what I notice. Oxford st of course isn't much now at all anytime, even dead during mardi gras. - King st is the colourful queer promenade now. But as I also get out less, I think my views need to be taken in context. Trash is the jobbing performer, and mixing it with whatever anyone is doing a lot more than me now.

3. How would you say a radical or progressive nightclub/performance space is different from the mainstream gay venues, 'big parties' and superclubs?

I am old-fashioned in my terminology. 'Straight' to me means square in the beatnik sense of the word. And I 'prefer women'. Nothing more solid than that. A radical or progressive space has that ethos behind it. It wouldn't question the gender of my partner. It has no expectations, and no rules, but it is actually a very ethical place to be - much more than a mainstream one - for these very reasons - ie, intrinsic to real mutual respect is giving your fellow humans the space to evolve in any way they need to, no matter how unexpected. The ethics contain individual freedom within communal harmony - you can't have one without the other. A mainstream place will have more emphasis on profits and individual gratification = the communal ethics will be rules about conformity, rather than ethics of harmony. The strongest ethics welcome change and experimentation. There are some marginal hetero spaces - some of the Lanfranchi type events - where I will feel more comfortable than at the Midnight Shift. Or Gurlisque. I think mainstream gay culture can get too separatist, and I don't trust separatism - it is too close to misogyny and misandry. and I can't tolerate intolerance!!

these sorts of ethics are fully reflected in the programming of music and performance - once

again, the embrace of the new and unexpected, the joy of risk-taking. The commitment to continually turning over of the stones, and so on. Not being precious about your context, or yourself, able to let go of comfort zones that provide superficial solace. In the luxuriously abundant 90s, much of the political and social commentary was criticism of mainstream gay culture. Obviously you wouldn't see it at mardi gras.

But I must say, I often tip-toe around these words radical and progressive, because when I write the ethics like that, I think It's just common-sense. It's so basic. What is so radical about it really? to me it's NORMAL.

4. What do/did you 'get out of' of partying and/or performing, particularly in the 90s?

Erm .. mental breakdown, trackmarks, many hysterical encounters that I can't properly recall. Big gaps in my artistic 'product' ... alienation from and a bad rep in OzLit ... Lots of sex and fun. Countless incidents of embarrassment and craven humiliation ... that continue to surface from the mud of my mind to my chagrin Dazzling inspiring and educational exposure to music and design and performance. Fluid on the knee from too much dancin. Desperation, depression, paranoia and fear. Regrets I didn't write about it more. Joy and epiphany. Fury at the wider world for its continual dismissal of a precious realm - that it sat on like a parasite all the while. A truly amazing time. I don't think I've ever described its horrors and heavens adequately ...

5. A lot of work goes into making a party happen, but this is not paid work, and rarely makes money, so why do people do it?

For the same reason we write novels. Folly. Ambition. Vision. Just an uncontrollable urge really.

F.

Trash Vaudeville – interview: June 2007

Appendix 3.

1. What kind of involvement did you have in the scene in the 90s? And now?

I started performing in the underground queer/bent club scene in early 1991. i was living in a unique share house in Brumby st Surry Hills, in fact we actually occupied two adjoining ramshackled terraces living as one large household, pulling down the back fence, chipping in to purchase an above ground swimming pool, altering one lounge room into a pseudo sometime disco complete with stage, and the adjoining kitchen into a dressing room, the camp quality of these transformation only emphasised by how tiny these rooms were. This young household was a mix of girls and boys, homo and hetro but predominately bent as! We were a gang of eight flatmates plus the extra numbers of household friends, when we all went out together truth is we had difficulty getting let into venues all together. Ferral freaky looks were not yet in fashion, coloured hair and glam garb complimented with piercings and the like were still considered to trashy, aggressive shouts of f@#%ing freaks were not uncommon, I remember being reviled as 'street trash'. The club scene door people did not know how to

interpret are looks and genuinely queer sensibility. So the predominately gay male venues would not want to let in the girls amongst us, and vice versa at predominately womens venues. The one place we could all go and where we felt welcome and accepted was at the Wicked Women club nights and events. We would really be able to let loose and it wasnt long before at the newtown club night 'Oneiro's' that Lisa Halliday and Jasper Laybutt asked if we would like to be the floorshow.

The first show involved six of us, including Glita Supanova(of Gurlisque) the now professional circus artist Azaria Universe, and of course myself. We threw ourselves into the scene, performing in several consecutive years of the Ms Wicked competition, I of course was always a supporting cast member as this was a womens erotic sexually expressive performance event. In the final year there was a Mr Wicked competition, which I entered and won. It was great timing that my close friend Sex Intents also won Ms Wicked at the same year. I dug up the edition of Wicked Women magazine featuring us both the other day and it was fun reading our declarations as Ms and Mr Wicked.

We became involved with Frank Sammut's Sex Subculture parties as part of the entertainment and other similar events including the first ever alternative Mardi Gras party at the Moore Park Bowling Club (I think 1993) Those of us who were interested in performing have gone on to create different kinds of work, all of us seem to have maintained a combination of camp and darker tones.

My working life has gone towards incorporating physical skills, especially in relation to club work, but my heart is really into the possibilities of experimental media work incorporating animation, physical skills and character work. This has been possible through a long relationship with Performance Space, which started in the mid/late nineties with club bent, and later an Australia Council funded solo show in 2000. Things have of course inevitably changed a lot and now I collaborate with the contemporary burlesque artist Kira Carden, forming our hoola hoop company 'Hula La'

2. What were queer nightclub culture, performance and costume like in the 90s?

It seems that contemporary culture has become ever increasingly saturated with visual imagery.

Significantly the net seems to have altered notions of community, and when it comes to the creation of artistic works the notions of ownership and authorship. There is good and bad in this. The nineties seemed to be a time when the images of subcultures were constantly being unearthed and presented to the world. In many ways this gave a false knowledge to the mainstream about what the image and personal embodiment of subversive acts really meant. A prime example is the adopting and then rather quick abandonment of S and M imagery in Madonna's commercial output in the mid part of the decade. Drag culture had a similar exposure with material like Priscilla Queen of the Desert, a movie I have never liked, basing itself on themes of inclusion and acceptance but look at the racist portrayal of the asian mail order bride!

The costuming and street culture amongst the queer underground of the time that was about quite localised forms of belonging was rapidly exposed. All of my friends into performing had problems with unauthorized publication of artistic work and our personal images. Our protests

where possible were met with rebuffs along the lines that we should be flattered and grateful, but the truth is that others were profiteering from the distribution of our stuff. E.g.; images of Sex Intense taken under other pretenses appearing on the cover of a book and post cards, my image appearing unsolicited in an expensive fashion spread in Australian Vogue, the model on the opposing page wearing a dress equaling \$2.500, me from head to foot, including ravaged fake fur from a communal wardrobe in a squatted boat building works, totaling four dollars! But this doesn't all really matter to much now. Dressing up for heading out or just the street was a creative pursuit. Dressing cheap and sexy was the mission, and not taking it that seriously. It was invariably of op shop cast offs and our own creations. For partying anything experimental from bandages to bubble wrap and showing some flesh would do.

At the time us homo freaks had a close association with other underground communities, like the anarchist run community space Jellyheads. We were involved in protest actions and social events. It seemed that in just a couple of years that when I met other young gay men who looked like me they were just sporting a look and the image of sexualised punk glam clothes or piercings and tattoos no longer had any true social currency. I don't think this is unique to Sydney or to the nineties. Some might argue it's the nature of capitalism to constantly consume, whether its images of people doing their own thing or whether its gentrification. Either way the net is an interesting development, connecting technologised global communities but also dispersing or diluting actual communal spaces. I performed a show the other week as part of a crazy fun night called You Little Stripper in the soon to be defunct space named Lanfranchi. I performed naked and then spent the best part of the following week attempting to get explicit images taken during the show removed from the global shared photo site Flickr. Notions of discretion, authorship and respect for performers seem to be degenerating even further from the problems we all experienced twelve or so years ago.

font: by senVoodoo

'Aftermath' – Artspace – 17/8/07

Font is a tableaux vivant about intimacy, fear and disease. It presents the primal substance of blood as a symbolic and physical carrier of sustenance, and contagion.

Corporeal pain and the breaching of the skin, as utilised in the performance work of McGregor and Wojak (senVoodoo), serve as vehicles for accessing a realm of intense focus. The use of the body under duress engages the audience on a profoundly visceral level, requiring a negotiation of notions of mortality, contagion, sacrament and the body's essential fluidity. The ritualistic and immediate act of bleeding, and the blending of blood within the font itself, are symbols of alchemical union and transformation.

Font is largely informed by the hepatitis C positive status of McGregor. When the skin is breached, intensely emotive forces of trust, intimacy and power exchange take place between a positive and negative performer.

For Didier Anzieu the 'skin ego' works "as a containing, unifying envelope for the Self; as a protective barrier for the psyche; and as a filter of exchanges and a surface of inscription for the first traces, a function which makes representation possible". In *Font*, the skin is the boundary between the Self and the world. The presence of a potentially fatal blood borne virus imposes a quarantine on the carrier. Implied in this is social and psychological stigmatisation. The breach of the skin, and the flow of blood in a public arena, thus become a graphic assertion of the Self against boundaries both externally and internally imposed. senVoodoo's painterly, theatrical ethos combined with serious medical procedures also poses questions about our notions of artifice.

Font was originally conceived about five years ago. With the passing of time, it has evolved from an articulation of a coming together, to a parting of ways. Another significance it has collected was from the death late last year of McGregor's mother Gwenda from leukaemia; Gwenda's only treatment throughout her brief period of illness was blood transfusions. Tonight's performance is dedicated to Gwenda McGregor.

Creative team :

Sound and camera installation - George Poonkhin Khut.

Medical team – Gary Nicholls and Rita Aimohty

Production, direction & performance – AñA Wojak & Fiona McGregor

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