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**Title: The relational geographies of chemsex: a ‘weak theory’ approach**

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, having sexual encounters under the influence of recreational drugs -e.g. mephedrone often referred to as ‘mcat’ in England or ‘mef’ in Italy, GHB/GHL often referred to as ‘G’, crystallized methamphetamine often referred to as ‘tina’ or ‘T’, freebase cocaine often referred to as ‘basata’ in Italy, Methylenedioxypropylone simply referred to as ‘MDPV’, ‘MDPK’ or ‘peevee’- appears to have become a well-defined transnational cultural practice among gay men. Generally known as ‘chemsex’ or ‘Party and Play’ (PNP), this practice has become the object of intense public discourse and scrutiny across general media, medical practitioners, health institutions, NGOs and groups working on gay men’s sexual health, and scholars from different disciplines. The practice of chemsex is usually associated with unprotected sex without condoms- also known as ‘bareback’ or raw sex- with multiple partners. Chemsex usually involves also the use of sexuopharmaceuticals (the most used being Viagra and Cialis in their patented or generic version) to support erection.

From a public health perspective, chemsex has been mostly framed as a pathological issue derived from internalized homophobia, drug addiction and HIV-related stigma, and requiring professional intervention because associated with higher rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (e.g. Bourne et al, 2015; Bryant et al, 2018; Kirby and Thornbur-Dunwell, 2013; Stuart, 2013). Rejecting pathologizing and individualizing analyses of this practice, scholars in social and cultural studies have emphasized the role of different factors in driving the rise of chemsex, such as enhanced sexual pleasure, the will to ‘play’ and the quest for sociality in individualized and neoliberal contexts (e.g. Hakim, 2019; Race, 2015, 2017). Among social science analyses of this practice, geographers have surprisingly remained silent, despite the frequent association of chemsex with urban/metropolitan areas, ‘gayborhoods’ and private homes. Against this disciplinary silence, the paper develops a geographical relational analysis of the wide-spreading of this sexual practice, focusing on the experiences of gay men living with HIV in two Italian cities (Bologna; Milan) and Italian gay men living with HIV in three English cities (Leicester; London; Milan). Assigning a central role to place in the analysis of chemsex, the paper frames place *relationally*, i.e. as the encounter between *here* and *there*, the material and the virtual, mobile human and non-human actors. Through these lenses, the geographies of chemsex include, among others, the private home, the digital spaces of hook-up applications, sex on premise venues such as bathhouses and clubs, the city of

residence, mobilities towards different places (mostly for leisure) both in Italy and abroad, cultural sexual imageries of places and countries.

To emphasize the central role of place and geographical knowledge to understand chemsex, the paper's theoretical framework builds on 'weak theory' (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Sedgwick, 1997; Tomkins, 1963) because it conceives things as open, entangled, connected and in flux, while focusing on ordinary practices and heterogeneity in more-than-human worlds. By developing a 'weak geographical theory' of chemsex, the paper responds to the call formulated more than a decade ago by Del Casino Jr (2007), inviting geographers to engage with the intersection among sexual practices, drug use, sexuopharmaceuticals, sexual health and masculinities from the part of geographers. As acknowledged by Davies et al (2018) in their review on sexuality, space, and health, Del Casino Jr's important call has remained unanswered both in geographies of sexualities and health geographies.

The contribution of the paper is twofold. First, it brings a relational geographical analysis within the interdisciplinary literature on chemsex, showing the constitutive role of place for chemsex. Against the geographical reductionism of existing analyses of these practices, reducing place to simply a context where practices take place, the paper demonstrates that place actively shapes the different ways people practice chemsex. In doing so, it also rejects the determinism of those analyses circumscribing chemsex only to specific metropolitan locations considered in isolation from other places. Second, it contributes to the field of geographies of sexualities by bringing back sexual practices themselves into the core of the analysis, notably one of the sexual practices that has created most public controversial debates in recent years in many different countries around the globe. Geographies of sexualities have increasingly become a legitimate field of studies, but despite its popularity the engagement with sexual practices within the field has remained limited (Bell, 2007; Binnie, 1997, G. Brown, Browne and Lim, 2011), the main focus of analysis being around identity, citizenship and activism (e.g. Binnie and Valentine, 1999; G. Brown and Browne, 2016; M. Brown, 2012, 2014; Browne, Lim and Brown, 2007; Johnston, 2016, 2017). Some important exceptions (written in English) to this lack of engagement with the materiality of sex and bodies are the works of Bain and Nash (2006), Bonner-Thompson (2017), G. Brown (2008a), Gurney (2000), Langarita (2019), Misgav and Johnston (2014), Sanders-McDonagh (2017).

(paper outline)

## 2. Analysing chemsex beyond pathologization

The association between gay sex and intoxication has a long-standing history (Race, 2017), but what is usually referred to as chemsex (Stuart, 2016) assumes specific contemporary connotations because includes the use of smartphones and hook-up apps. As discussed by Race (2017), all the elements composing chemsex (Internet and hook-up apps; unprotected sex with multiple partners; recreational drug use) have traditionally been seen as pathological by health professional and scholars because connected to rising HIV and STI rates. Moreover, epidemiological research has found correlations between chemsex and HIV infection on one side, and histories of abuse and mental health issues on the other (Brennan et al, 2007; Stall et al, 2008). While these findings pose troubling questions that cannot be ignored, the problem with relying solely on a medical/psychiatric categorization to frame a social phenomenon is

that it tends to reduce the whole process to individual histories of damage. Against this reductive and pathologizing perspective, Race frames chemsex as a sociocultural assemblage: “a collective, evolving scene of practices, affective relations, meanings, objects and devices with their own organizing logics, relative coherence and synergistic dynamics; a material source of pleasure, connection, eroticism, intimacy, experimentation and transformation for many participants, notwithstanding the known dangers” (2017: 134).

The dimensions of pleasure, intimacy and experimentation were already highlighted in the study by Hurley and Prestage published in 2009, where they introduced the concept of ‘intensive sex partying’ (ISP), resulting from the intersection between ‘sex pigs’ (i.e. men seeking for intensive sex experiences’ and ‘party boys’ (i.e. those attending gay parties often under the influence of illicit drugs). This encounter produced “frequent partying, frequent sex, higher rates of anal sex than amongst gay men generally, sequential or simultaneous sex partners, specific drug combinations, a broad sexual repertoire with sexual experimentation and unprotected anal intercourse with casual partners” (2009: 597-8). Hurley and Prestage’s analytical framework accounts for the relation between sex, intensity, pleasure and partying in order to go beyond a pathological reading of these practices. Their analysis makes also a clear mention of spatial elements, ISP occurring “in domestic spaces, sex parties, and sex-on-premises venues” (p. 598).

In a paper published in 2015, Race produced a deep advancement to the current critical understanding of chemsex by approaching it as a ‘culture’, i.e. “a cluster of activities and practices that are meaningful for participants with their own organizing logics and relative coherence; a significant source of pleasure, connection, eroticism and intimacy-notwithstanding the known dangers” (p. 256). Following his more general interest in rethinking prevention strategies beyond hegemonic models based on a negative representation of sex, Race emphasizes how the sexual spaces produced by chemsex often lead to community formation. In his view, chemsex results from considering sex as play within online gay communities, opening new possibilities for pleasure and experimentation. In a more recent paper co-authored with colleagues (Pienaar et al, 2020) aimed at challenging the view of drugs as inherently harmful and risky without considering the other phenomena composing individual and collective lives, they explore how the use of drugs allow research participants to alter their bodily experience (in the case of people who might struggle with their own bodies such as trans people) and experiment erotic practices that they would have never imagined to try.

In conceptualizing chemsex as culture, Race (2015; 2017) makes also another major contribution to the debate by analyzing the specific role of what he defines ‘infrastructures of the sexual encounter’, i.e. 3G, Wi-Fi, hook-up devices, seen as *mediators* of the sexual encounter, “making certain activities, relations, and practices possible while obviating others” (2015: 254). According to Race, access to these devices is key in defining chemsex together with the possibility to have access to private accommodation in urban centers, “something that depends in the contemporary metropolis on economic affluence and/or cultural capital to an unprecedented degree” (*ibid*).

Building on the work of Race, Hakim (2019) analyzes the rise of chemsex in London as part of a series of conjunctural dynamics, digital technologies being only one of them. For Hakim, chemsex highlights changes in practices of intimacy available to gay and bisexual men under

the current configuration of neoliberalism in Britain, analyzed through the lenses of the city of London as materially shaped by neoliberalism, and the ways migration patterns have been reconfigured by neoliberal logic. Opposing the panic behind chemsex in public discourse in Britain, Hakim defines chemsex in London as “a way for some, largely migrant, gay and bisexual men to experience a sense of collectivity not only in a city where the collective physical spaces they have historically gathered are closing down due to neoliberal approaches to town planning (Campkin and Marshall 2017), but also in a wider culture in which neoliberalism has been hegemonic and that, in multiple ways, alienates them from experiencing the possibility of collectivity at all” (2019: 253).

By acknowledging the cultural and social dimension of chemsex, the works discussed in this section represent key references for the analytical effort of the paper. However, what is missing in these analyses is the spatial nature of chemsex, i.e. how specific spatialities (and situations) shape chemsex (for an exception, even though not focused on chemsex, but on drug consumption and clubbing, see Slavin, 2004). I am not arguing that these contributions do not engage with space; as seen, Hurley and Prestage (2009) acknowledge the central role of domestic spaces and sex-on-premises venues, while Race and Hakim define chemsex as an urban phenomenon. From a geographer’s perspective, there are two main problems with this engagement with space. First, assuming that chemsex occurs only in large urban centers results from the high visibility of gay spaces and services (including sexual health and NGOs) there, reifying the erasure of homosexual lives and experiences in ‘ordinary’, small towns and less densely inhabited areas (G. Brown, 2008b; Myrdahl, 2013). In times of housing unaffordability and gentrification well beyond central metropolitan locations (Lees et al, 2016), involving also queer people (Smith and Holt, 2005), the residential locations of gay and bisexual men have become more diverse (Gorman-Murray and Waitt, 2009; Whittemore and Smart, 2016). Second, the spatialities of chemsex cannot be considered in isolation, the risk being of ‘isolating’ phenomena, erasing their multiscalar and complex character. To overcome these limitations, in the next section I propose a geographical relational reading of chemsex based on ‘weak theory’.

### 3. Relational geographies and weak theory

The conception of place in this paper is relational (e.g. Darling, 2009; Jones, 2009; Massey, 2005); this is a well-established approach in geography, used to research, among others, love (Morrison et al, 2013), the everyday dimension of austerity, including family, friendship and intimacy (S. M. Hall, 2019), and disabilities (E. Hall and Wilton, 2017). Framing the geographies of chemsex as relational means acknowledging that spaces result from the interactions with other spaces, individuals and non-human elements but they also concur to reshape them; this co-construction is ever-changing and open (Massey, 2004, 2005). According to Massey (2004, 2005) the local (place) is not less abstract than the global, flows and connections making places for what they are. So “a real recognition of the relationality of space points to a politics of connectivity” (Massey, 2005: 17). In a similar vein, Amin defines place “as a site of intersection between network topologies and territorial legacies. The result is no simple displacement of the local by the global, of place by space, of history by simultaneity and flow, of small by big scale, or of the proximate by the remote. Instead, it is a subtle folding together of the distant and the proximate, the virtual and the material, presence

and absence, flow and stasis, into a single ontological plane upon which location – a place on the map – has come to be relationally and topologically defined” (2007: 103).

The relational approach has been adopted also within geographies of sexualities. In their analyses of the changes of LGBT neighborhoods in Sydney, Gorman-Murray and Nash (2014) have suggested to frame them “as mobile and relational spaces- mutable assemblages, repeatedly (re)constructed from flows of people, knowledge and capital. These mobile practices and representations both constitute and connect places, symbolically and materially, in geographically and historically contextual ways” (p. 624). The paper extends Gorman-Murray and Nash analysis to the spaces of chemsex, showing how they are (re)made by different actors (both human and non-human) through different mobile practices (and encounters) that connect different places.

Binnie (2014) has called for a relational comparative perspective (on relational comparison see, among others, Robinson, 2011; Ward, 2010) to the study of sexuality and desire and the making of ‘world cities’. According to Binnie, a relational comparative perspective challenges “narratives about the relative ‘backwardness’ or ‘progressiveness’ of cities with regard to the regulation of sexualities that has been used to mark some cities as more tolerant, cosmopolitan and entrepreneurially creative than others” (2014: 596). As it will be shown in the analysis, narratives of ‘backwardness’ and ‘progressiveness’ (but also ‘sexiness’ or ‘pigginess’) are central in the research participants’ depictions of places and sexual encounters.

How to theorize the coming together of different spaces, places, human actors and non-human elements (such as drugs and sexuopharmaceuticals), mediators (in Race’s conceptualization) and knowledges in shaping the practice of chemsex? Rather than looking for socio-spatial relations of causality and closed, all-encompassing readings of chemsex, I here propose to look at weak theory. Originally introduced by Tomkins (1963) in his work on affect, weak theory has been advocated by Sedgwick (e.g. 1997, 2003) as a response to the comprehensiveness and grand claims of ‘strong theory’. Discussing Tomkins’ work in a co-authored paper, she argues that “the measure of a theory’s strength is not how well it avoid negative affect or finds positive affect, but the size and topology of the domain it organizes and its methods of determining that domain” (Sedgwick and Frank, 1995: 519). In human geography, weak theory is at the core of Gibson-Graham’s project (e.g. 2006, 2008) against capitalocentrism, exemplified by strong theory’s reductionist view of the world as organized only by capitalism and neoliberalism. For Gibson-Graham, adopting a weak theory is a way to think and explore different possibilities beyond “what we already know” (2008: 619): “the practice of weak theory involves refusing to extend explanation too widely or deeply, refusing to know too much. (...) Weak theory could be undertaken with a reparative motive that welcomes surprise, tolerates coexistence, and cares for the new, providing a welcoming environment for the objects of our thoughts” (*ibid*). Following Gibson-Graham, Wright has recently proposed a weak theory of belonging because it “promotes attention to affective assemblages, to the ways things, people, affects and places, with different trajectories, may come together, albeit in often tentative, inconclusive or evolving ways” (2015: 392).

Gibson-Graham’s work has also inspired Del Casino Jr’s call (2007) to think the geographical relation between sex and drugs through ‘flaccid theory’, a form of weak theory, because it allows to understand the complex geographies of drug use and sex. Writing to trace the

absence of studies on the sexualized geographies of drugs, Del Casino Jr refers primarily to Viagra, but in the paper he discusses different uses of the drug beyond its original scope (and promotional message), mentioning the example of gay men using Viagra in combination to recreational drugs to experiment new forms of sexual pleasure. Del Casino Jr's paper ends with a call for analyses of "the networked relations of drugs and sex, the reorganization of space in relation to the use of drugs and practices of sex, and the performances of place through the use of drugs. These analyses need not exclude complexity, difference, and diversity" (2007: 910). While the focus of this paper is on the geographies of sex and multiple forms of drugs (recreational; sexuopharmaceuticals; antiretroviral therapies, ARTs) rather than just sexuopharmaceuticals, it responds to Del Casino's call by analyzing the central role of the relational construction of place in the experience of chemsex for gay men living with HIV.

#### 4. Methods

The article draws on research conducted as part of a comparative transnational project (2018-20) about the lives of different generations of gay men living with HIV in England and Italy. The project relies on different methods (a survey; biographic interviews; interviews with service providers; media discourse analysis), but the present article has been mainly informed by biographic interviews with gay men living with HIV. 59 biographic interviews have been realized across the two countries, the analysis included in the paper focusing only on those who made reference to practicing chemsex (25 out of 59 participants). In order to emphasize the relational geographical perspective of the paper, the paper focuses on 19 out of the 25 narratives about chemsex, i.e. those of participants living in Italy and those of Italian living in England. Interviews were conducted in person by the author across two Italian cities (Bologna, 3 interviews; Milan, 8 interviews) and three English ones (London, 5 interviews; Manchester, 2 interviews; Leicester, 1 interview). The original project did not include London, but I decided to include it for two main reasons: i) struggle to find research participants in Leicester; ii) better emphasize the relational geographical perspective of the project by interviewing Italians who previously lived in one of the major Italian cities (including Bologna and Milan). The relevance of the cities where the research has been conducted in relation to chemsex is proven by the increasing presence of specialized community services and programs around chemsex in all these cities. Moreover, panic discourse (Hakim, 2019) around chemsex has emerged in both countries, with a myriad of sensationalist pieces published across media.

Participants were recruited through ads in online hook-up apps and websites (Grindr, Bareback Real Time), attendance to dozens of meetings and events destined to gay men living with HIV and snowballing. The age range of the 19 participants whose narratives informed this paper goes from the age group 18-25 to 55-65. 1 participant belongs to the group 18-25; 4 to the group 23-35; 8 to the group 35-45; 5 to the group 45-55; 1 to the group 55-65. Across the 11 living in Italy, 8 of them hold an Italian passport, 1 holds a EU passport, 2 a non-EU passport; 3 out of the 11 are non-White. Across the 8 Italians living in England, none of them holds a British passport; 1 out of the 8 is non-White.

The study has received ethical approval from both the host University (University of Leicester) and the funder (European Commission) through two separated review processes.

All participants provided informed written consent and their participation was voluntary without remuneration. Whenever possible, interviews were based on the guidelines of the biographic narrative interpretive method (BNIM; see Wengraf, 2001), i.e. the interview was realized in two parts. In the first one, the participant was only asked a very broad question about his life, so he was actually free to talk about whatever he wanted, for as long as he wanted, there was no moderation from my part. The second interview followed the more traditional model of the semi-structured interview, whereas the questions were based on what (not) said in the first interview. As expected, the interviews diverged greatly in length (from 62 to 341 minutes in total) and topics covered. Participants were free to use objects or pictures that they felt the need for. In the case of participants struggling with the chronological sequence of the events they discussed, we used mental maps of time and space. To make the space of the interview more comfortable, before recording participants were given the opportunity to chat and ask any question they wanted. The interviews were realized in places chosen by the participant in order to make them feel more comfortable. All the interviews considered for this article were in Italian, the quotes included were translated by the author.

In line with ethical guidelines, the interviews were fully anonymous (i.e. any personal information making them identifiable was cancelled; other characteristics, such as age and occupation, were classified under general categories) and the participants were given the opportunity to choose a pseudonym or code. Interviews were re-listened several times before transcription. Transcriptions were coded through a three stages-process. The first stage was based on a life course perspective, thus turning points were highlighted (e.g. “moving for university”, “migration abroad”, “new job”); the second stage was based on topics (e.g. “sexual life”, “love life”, “healthcare”); the third one on ‘emotional codes’ (e.g. “distress”, “happiness”, “enjoyment”) associated to each life transition and topic.

## 5. Relational urban geographies of chemsex

As discussed, existing scholarship on chemsex tends to frame it mainly as an urban phenomenon. The analysis of the narratives of my research participants seems to confirm this idea: the discovery of, and the following engagement with, chemsex are unambiguously associated to cities. However, an important element emerges from the analysis when compared to existing studies: chemsex is associated with specific cities (or prime gay holidays locations such as Gran Canaria) *elsewhere*, not the city of residence. The following quote from the interview with Madox (aged 35-45, non-White Italian living in Milan) highlights this:

Madox: If I’m not wrong, it was 2013 when I had my first chemsex session. I was on holidays in Berlin with a friend of mine, we went to Berghain to dance and we met these guys, very very cute, we ended up at their place, I think we were like seven and they offered us Tina, which I had never tried it before (...).

Cesare: So it was the first time you were doing sex with multiple partners under the influence of drugs?

Madox: Not exactly, I had been to some orgies and been using coke or MD, but that was different.

Cesare: How?

Madox: We went on for like 36 hours, I had never had sex for so long before that, (...), but the main thing was the atmosphere, everyone was so chilled and relaxed, but also so pig [*maiale*], I felt like everything was possible, I could do whatever, I did whatever [smiling], (...), I had never experienced this feeling in Milan.

In the prosecution of the interview, Madox said that he usually goes to Berlin at least once a year, sometimes even four, this being very easy thanks to cheap low cost flights (Madox is low/middle-class, he works as a shop assistant in a retail store and shares his flat with two more people in order to be able to afford to live in Milan). Asked about what makes him come back to Berlin so often, he said that “it’s the spirit of the city, you can be whoever you want and do whatever you want”. Asked about what prevents this in Milan, he mentioned “the attitude of people, (...), if you do something, the next day half Grindr knows what you did and you are labeled as a dirty pig”. For Madox, this symbolizes the persisting hypocrisy of Italian society around sex despite the increasing acceptance and visibility of gay men in the country, especially in Milan. In his words: “Milan is the only place I can live in Italy, the rest is just provincial culture, (...), but at the end of the day Milan is still in Italy”.

Madox interview highlights several common themes emerged throughout the research. The first is the association with the discovery of chemsex with a city located somewhere else. The most cited cities are Amsterdam, Barcelona, Berlin, Brussels and Madrid, all well-known main gay destinations attracting gay visitors and migrants from Europe and the rest of the world thanks to the presence of established parties (e.g. *La Demence* in Brussels), clubs (e.g. Berghain in Berlin), festivals (Circuit in Barcelona) and ‘gayborhoods’ (e.g. Chueca in Madrid). Likewise other world cities, these are diverse in terms of population (including high queer visibility); however, they can be defined as prime examples of ‘erotic cities’ according to the analysis of Hubbard (2012: 186): “while all world cities are seductive, some cities are decidedly more seductive than others, becoming de facto *erotic cities*”. While Hubbard’s analysis of cities such as Bangkok, Havana and Las Vegas is mainly centered around heterosexual desire, his definition can be extended to different cities, such as the abovementioned ones, in order to address homosexual desire.

The second theme highlighted in Madox words and emerged in several interviews represents a sort of paradox, i.e. the narrated ‘discovery’ of chemsex does not necessarily mark the first encounter with sex under the influence of drugs, several narratives describing an established frequency of having sex when clubbing (and consuming mainly MDMA, coke or ketamine) or rightly after the end of the party. However, participants do not frame those encounters as chemsex. From the analysis of narratives, the ‘discovery of chemsex’ is in fact associated to three elements: i) the encounter with a new drug (‘tina’ in the case of Madox, mef or G in many more cases); ii) a longer duration of the sexual encounter (that can be connected to the use of ‘tina’ and mef); iii) being on holidays or, more generally, away from home, because in Italy “chemsex was not a thing” (Alpe, aged 35-45, White Italian living in Bologna). The discovery of chemsex abroad meant that re-engaging with this practice once back home, they became some sort of ‘pioneers’ importing the practice. As argued by MrP (aged 45-55, French White living in Milan), “in 2011, 2012, there was no profile on Grindr with a pill or indicating ‘chems’, you wrote ‘chems’ in your messages nobody understood what was about, (...), now it is everywhere on Grindr, you can easily find chemsex orgies on a Tuesday afternoon, the city

has changed, it has become more European, even though there is still a lot of blame discourse around chemsex, it is unbearable”.

The third theme refers to a full discovery of sexual pleasure (and ‘pigginess’) associated with chemsex. As a matter of fact, Madox words, “I felt like everything was possible, I could do whatever, I did whatever”, echo the words of several participants, for whom chemsex has represented an important step forward in their experience of sexual pleasure. This confirms what already discussed in multiple studies (e.g. Hurley and Prestage, 2009; Race, 2015), i.e. chemsex is usually associated to enhanced sexual pleasure. However, I here want to stress the specific spatial relational construction of sexual pleasure: the maximization of pleasure is associated with the construction of spaces that resemble what can be found abroad. While MrP’s words quoted above associate the wide-spreading of chemsex with Milan becoming more ‘European’, other participants made reference to specific cities. For instance, Gianluca (45- 55, White Italian living in Milan) describes how “Milan has become like London, you can find chill-outs [English word used] whenever you want, you don’t need to rely on few clubs open for few hours at night. (...) For someone like me who loves long sessions with fisting, this is fantastic, (...), my sexual life has really improved”.

Despite the description of more (and better) opportunities, the greatest majority of participants continue to perceive and represent Italy (and its cities) as ‘backward’, this being the fourth theme highlighted by Madox words (“but at the end of the day Milan is still in Italy”). The idea of living in a ‘backward’ country or city is inherently related to other places seen as ‘forward’ (*stanno avanti* is one of the most common Italian expressions used in the interviews). In particular, the being ‘forward’ of other places appears to be mainly based on three considerations: i) more ‘freedom’, i.e. nobody cares about what you do, those cities and countries perceived as less homophobic than Italy (and its cities, including Milan). Interestingly, these considerations seem to include also healthcare institutions and medical professionals. Gab (aged 35-45, White Italian living in London) describes the English sexual healthcare system as “very open”, giving patients the possibility “to speak without brakes” of sexual practices and prevention, while in the Italian cities he lived before (Rome and Milan), he encountered mainly prudery, “the doctor does not even look into your eyes if the conversation is about sex”; ii) more relaxedness around drug consumption and less police controls abroad. In one of the most detailed accounts of drug access shared during the interviews, Gab explains how easy is to buy drugs in London, “the dealer comes to your place, (...), you can text him on Whatsapp, you get a full menu of what is available including prices”. Similar descriptions have been provided by the interviewees in Manchester as well as by other research participants in relation to other European cities (the most cited about this being Amsterdam, Barcelona and Madrid). On the contrary, dealers in Italy are described as extremely cautious because of the heavy regime of control. The relaxedness abroad is associated with an increased availability of a wider set of drugs, especially ‘tina’, which in Italy seems to be still pretty rare (and extremely expensive). The unavailability of the drug makes the narrative of the interviewees around ‘tina’ semi-romantic, some of the descriptions for the experience of using ‘tina’ being “incredible”, “beyond what you can dream” and “unforgettable”; iii) gay guys in those erotic cities are ‘piggier’, i.e. more open towards experimenting different sexual practices (e.g. fisting, double penetrations, role playing, sex in public space). This openness is associated by several participants to an increased use of ‘tina’

abroad (in Bologna and Milan the drug most used for chemsex parties seems to be 'basata'). However, the situation appears to be changing in Italy thanks to transnational tourism and mobilities, several participants acknowledging how gay guys seem to have become more available to experimentation.

This discussion echoes Binnie's point (2014) about the relational construction of 'backwardness' and 'forwardness': the symbolic construction of specific places as 'progressive' and more sexually open and tolerant, established through specific events (festivals, parties) and spatial configurations (the 'gayborhood'), still shapes gay men's narratives of sexual practices and place imageries, attracting them for leisure (or migration). However, it is important to note how ideas, practices and knowledge circulate, their circulation making Italy and its cities more 'European' and 'forward' (*avanti*) according to the narratives of the research participants.

#### 6. Mobile assemblages of care, pleasure and sociality

Together with the urban, the private home is portrayed as the most meaningful spatial context in existing scholarship on chemsex. Aim of this section is not to rebut this claim, but to consider how the private home is just one of the multiple spatial components of the "socio-cultural assemblage" (Race, 2017: 134) of chemsex. By including multiple spatialities in the analysis of chemsex, I suggest to consider it as a mobile assemblage: chemsex sessions have different time durations (from one night to multiple days) and they often involve movement across different places within and beyond the city. Movement favors encounter with different human actors and non-human elements (e.g. different kinds of drugs, not just recreational, but also sexuopharmaceuticals and antiretrovirals) through the "infrastructures of the sexual encounter" (Race, 2015, 2017), such as mobile devices, 3G and wi-fi. The analysis of the narratives of the research participants around chemsex reveals two main forms of the assemblage.

The first one is what can be defined as a 'short' version, because it lasts around twelve hours. It often represents the 'happy ending' of a night out; for several participants this often involves clubbing, possibly in a place where there is a dark room or the chance to hook-up. At the club (or before entering), various drugs can be used (cocaine, MDMA, mef, or Ketamine in some cases) to better enjoy the situation; at the club, participants often meet (new or known) people, hooking-up (one-to-one or in group). This type of night out and encounter(s) at the club is the kind analyzed by Slavin (2004) in Sydney. He defines it as "tribal space", where "individual integrity recedes in relation to collective becoming. The drugs, proximity of bodies, and sexual energy within the space make it Dionysian in form—a powerful mode for expressing the vitality of the tribe" (2004: 284). From the club, the newly formed duo or group decides to continue to play either at someone's place or at the bathhouse. According to Kiram (aged 25-35, non-White, non-EU passport holder, living in Milan), the choice of where to go is fundamental: "if you don't want to go too crazy, you suggest the bathhouse, it is fun, you can meet more hot guys and you know it is not going to last for one full day". On the contrary, going to someone else's place, opens the way to the possibility to go on for much longer, "if you are having fun, it becomes difficult to leave" (Kiram). If you end up at someone else's place, changing plans, or sticking with them, depends on whom and what you encounter. As explained by Kiram, "many times I go there with the idea of going home by 2pm

but then more drugs appear, there is someone I like so I end up staying". This second part of the night (now become morning) at home or the bathhouse can include also the encounter with others up for the 'short' version of chemsex. These are guys who did not go out at night (or did not go clubbing), went to bed and then wake up in the morning and look for a chemsex encounter. If chemsex occurs at the bathhouse, the role of mobile devices is usually quite limited (unless there are not many people at the venue), while at home their use depends on the subject's willingness to play for long. Most participants explain indeed that once someone in the group starts to use Grindr or more generally their mobile devices, they expect the action to last for a very long time (not necessarily in the same place). In Karim's case, if he's not willing to play for long, he usually suggests to go to his own place; that way, he can tell the others he does not want more people to join and when he is tired he asks the others to leave. Clearly this situation of control relies on Karim's possibility to host others at his place because he lives alone; in a city expensive like Milan, this is not so common, so income availability and/or homeownership play an important role.

The second form of the chemsex encounter is the 'long' one, lasting one day or more. This represents the quintessential representation of the mobile assemblage I propose: while in the previous case mobility is quite limited, here movement plays a very important role. The way the 'long' chemsex session starts is very variable; like the previous, it can start as a night out (as seen with Karim) in a club, a cruising bar or the bathhouse; or it can start with a pre-arranged chemsex group party at someone's home. In the case of pre-arranged big group parties, multiple participants (both in England and Italy) describe how they take place outside the city. This is because big houses are often preferred for this kind of event, and they tend to be more common outside city center locations. Attendants to a pre-arranged chemsex group party are often some people already known by the organizer as well as new ones invited through hook-up apps (both in the day of the event and in previous days).

As analyzed by Miles (2017), the encounter between the private home and the digital space of the app creates a hybrid space, home becoming a semi-public space because open to anyone connected to the app who wants to 'play' (Race, 2015) in a specific way (i.e. bareback and assuming drugs). This hybridization of space for a long period of time opens different possibilities for each participant, creating mobile assemblages. As explained by Red80 (aged 35-45, White Italian living in Manchester), "someone stays two hours, someone stay two days, it depends on how you feel, how you enjoy the situation, what you were doing before the party, how many drugs are available there, how sexy the guys are, how nice the house space is". Leaving a house party does not mean the end of playing; participants describe how they go somewhere else to continue to play, this being either someone else's place or a commercial venue, such as a bathhouse or a party (possibly in a sex on premises venues). Mobility across different places and encounters appears therefore as the central element of 'long' chemsex. Participants describe how they start the 'party' with some drugs but then other drugs might appear, changing the course of events. As already anticipated, in Bologna and Milan the most used drug for chemsex appears to be 'basata'. Its use presents some issues, notably its high cost and its short effect, i.e. a great amount is needed to make the party last; therefore other drugs are also frequently used in combination with 'basata'. The choice to move across different places is strictly related to drugs availability. The interactions between drugs, places

and other actors (human and non-human) are extremely variable. As summarized by Gab, “you can be super excited and vigorous because of T, then maybe G or K kicks in and you don’t realize what is going on, then there might be some MD and you feel happy, get in the chatty mood and hug people, but then maybe T makes you paranoid and you just want to leave”.

When considering the role of drugs in chemsex situations, it is important to consider not just recreational ones, but also sexuopharmaceuticals and antiretrovirals. Viagra/Cialis and their generics give chemsex practitioners the possibility to be ‘hard’ despite the influence of recreational drugs; however, it might be the case that at a party the amount of attendants and recreational drugs available is much higher than the amount of sexuopharmaceuticals needed to keep everyone ‘hard’. In his interview, Karim names this situation as ‘chasing the top’ [*caccia all’attivo*], i.e. those who can maintain the erection become wanted by everyone else. For Karim these situations are somehow the most enjoyable because people are pushed to chat more, “you get to share many things, talk about yourself, laugh, watching videos, (...), these are the situations where I usually stay for longer, there is a very good vibe if people just chill and enjoy the moment even without a hard cock”. Karim’s words echo therefore the analysis of Hakim (2019) and Race (2015) on chemsex creating a sense of collectivity and community. While some people enjoy the situation and stay, others prefer to either try to look for someone with Viagra/Cialis online to invite to the party, or they just move somewhere else (alone or with someone from the same party).

When chemsex lasts for more than one day, one of the main considerations to be made concerns ARTs. Medical guidelines prescribe to be regular with ARTs, assuming them daily around the same time in order to avoid forgetting them. All research participants said to be on therapies, assuming them regularly. Asked about how they manage the assumption of ARTs (often requiring the assumption of a meal, even if little) during long chemsex sessions, most participants explain they have specific strategies. If invited to a party somewhere outside the city, they usually take ARTs with them; this way, they don’t have to worry about returning home by a specific time. In case they go out but they stay within the city, ARTs get to shape the course of the action, most of them describing that they go back home to get their pills (not necessarily alone, they might invite someone along with them). According to Red80, this makes the chemsex session more “sustainable”: “you get some time off, you breathe fresh air, walk a bit, try to eat some thing, get your pills, if you are with someone you have a nice chat and relax”. In other situations, participants describe how they ask the host or other participants whether they are on the same drug therapies; if so, there might be the opportunity to share the drug and not leave the party. For Madox, these situations lead to important conversations: “you talk about HIV, you don't hide, everything is much easier in that moment and you get to share the drug, (...), you can make very good connections that way, you often get to meet again the guy who lent you the pill to give him back one of yours”. Madox words highlight two important issues related to living with HIV in Italy: i) the persistence of the “second closet” (Di Felicianantonio, 2018), i.e. people not talking about their HIV-status with anyone. This is the case of multiple participants to the research, some of them have not disclosed their status to anyone close (family, workplace, longtime friends); ii) many hospitals give patients only monthly or bi-monthly doses, so people living with HIV need to be extremely mindful. However, the situation of scarcity does not seem to preclude forms of community around caring and sharing; these concern not just the pills, but also information

and knowledge. For instance, participants share information about specific services available, possibilities of therapies and many other issues related to healthcare (and beyond). This way, we can see how the assemblage of chemsex involves not only pleasure and sociality, as discussed by the literature, but also care and support. The most striking example in this respect, together with sharing ARTs, is given by taking care of those who might not feel well and/or collapse. Being experienced drug users and chemsex practitioners are very important in this case because they might know how to manage the situation, taking care of the person in need without panicking. In his interview, Gianluca told how he had some physical issues with the assumption of 'peevee' in the past, but someone who was there took care of him: "I feel weird telling you this, I sort of collapsed, I could not move but I perceived what was going on around me, and there was the host who took me to the bed and sat there next to me, just making sure that I was ok, that I was awake, cuddling me, giving me fresh water. (...) It is a very mixed feeling, I was clearly unwell but at the same time it was such a sweet moment, it reminds me of when I was sick and someone from my family took care of me".

The words of Gianluca and the narratives of care described by other participants highlight the complexity of the chemsex mobile assemblage as resulting from the encounter with different places, human actors and non-human elements. All-encompassing and closed analyses result therefore inadequate to understand the diversity, multiplicity and openness of the situations that emerge from these encounters. On the contrary, a 'weak' relational geographical approach, built around "attention to the ordinary, to more-than-humans, to practice and to radical heterogeneity" (Wright, 2015: 392), might better address these encounters in more-than-human worlds.

## Conclusions

Short summary of the paper: place is fundamental in shaping the practice, encounter with other human actors and non-human elements, acknowledging this encounter rejects the idea of assuming unidirectional and causalist explanations

Stress how relational geographical knowledge can further contribute to understand chemsex, but also gay life and sexual practices more generally

Need to emphasize the social and heterogeneous character of chemsex to avoid panic and moralistic discourses, while exploring its generative character (community, friendship, pleasure, etc).

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