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Minor Literature, Microculture: Fiona McGregor's Chemical Palace

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SYDNEY’S QUEER DANCE PARTY subculture has received little readily accessible documentation, and a felt need to make up for this lack animates Fiona McGregor’s Chemical Palace (2002). Tracing the transition from the mid-1990s to the early years of the current century, the narrative follows a group of self-styled “freaks art sluts and outcasts” (198) as they move through the vicissitudes of friendship, romance, and creative collaboration, and between and within the spaces of inner-city Sydney. The parties they stage—bacchanalian events fuelled, as the novel’s title indicates, by drugs such as ecstasy, MDA and crystal methamphetamine—provide a ritualistic focus in which their various shared passions coalesce and are distilled. The parties provide an opportunity to hear and to dance to various esoteric genres of electronic dance music, and they provide an arena for the expression of forms of identity predicated on non-normative erotic practices (sadomasochism, “kink,” promiscuity); above all, perhaps, the parties provide a focus on and a vehicle for various modes of performance, a central motivation within the lives of the characters. For the participants in the queer scene, “performance [is] life itself” (27); the staged shows and the elaborately costumed personae (“Mal Practice,” “The Green Woman”) that characterise the parties are intensified expressions of an everyday practice of theatricalised self-invention. Characters are nearly all known by aliases (such as Shifty, traffic and Bee) and dedicated to decking themselves out in constantly varying, outré sartorial and tonsorial assemblages—what the novel calls “dress-ups” or “looks.” In the queer scene, aesthetic expression, self-creation, and
hedonistic release are ends in themselves; as Bee muses: "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). This cohort of true believers is located in contradistinction not only to hegemonic heteronormative culture but also to Sydney’s “mainstream” gay and lesbian urban subculture—what the novel at one point designates “straight gays,” who presumably are as preoccupied with whitegoods and mortgages as “straight straights” (44).

Adding to the sense of the characters’ marginalisation, the novel emphasises that their endeavours in design, music and film-making are ignored or deemed illegitimate by the gatekeepers of these creative fields: Billy’s party fashion designs can’t be counted as part of her Masters degree (9); Bee’s risky lesbian porn is booed off stage at a film festival (157).

The book’s focus is thus on a markedly peripheral cultural grouping: what one review termed “a world at the edge of the fringe” (Hillis 8), and what I propose to call a microculture to emphasise its positioning as an oppositional and marginalised fraction within the already marginalised gay and lesbian urban scene. The queer microculture described in the novel exemplifies to something like the nth degree the minoritisation of sociality characteristic of postmodernity: the “becoming-minor of all populations” as Julian Murphet, deploying the terminology of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, puts it in his recent study of racial minorities and literary representation in Los Angeles (Murphet 1). With regard to subcultures specifically, this becoming-minor has been defined in recent cultural studies scholarship in terms of the proliferation and fluidity of subcultural forms and identities, a dynamic which, it is claimed, points to the thorough implication of subcultures within consumer capitalism. While critics once tended to argue that subcultures are “marginalised cultures that are quickly absorbed” by consumer society “and [thereby] robbed of their oppositional power” (Halberstam 425), current subculture theory has by and large moved away from this narrative, emphasising instead the ways in which they are coincident with processes of commodification and “born into” the marketplace of media images (McRobbie 39).

This line of argument has been developed to suggest that participation in subcultures is in fact complicitous with “schizophrenic” postmodern commodity culture. On this account, the reinvention of the self entailed by subcultural participation—most dramatically evident in the practice of “style-surfing,” or the quick turnover of different
subcultural looks—does not locate one as external to, but rather spec-
tacularly entrapped within, the imperative of commodity capitalism
that desire should be constantly reinvested, and identities constantly
remade (Muggleton; Polhemus, Style Surfing).

Chemical Palace’s description of the queer scene suggests, however,
that matters may be more complex. The book itself offers a familiar
narrative of subcultural formations being co-opted, massified and
diluted. It charts the rapid mainstreaming of dance music during the
1990s: once “underground” and anonymous, dance music, the nar-
rator notes towards the end of the novel, has become big business,
with “[the star DJ] David Morales... piped into supermarkets,” and
“the media appl[y]ing] faces to sounds, the nameless magic of dance
music aquir[ing] an ego” (319). This narrative is complemented by a
more particular lament for the decline of Sydney’s queer dance party
scene effected by the interimplicated phenomena of inner city gentri-
fication and an increasingly conservative—even repressive—political
climate; in recording the queer scene, then, the novel simultaneously
memorialises it. In tension with the novel’s insistence on the micro-
culture’s status as external to corporate and consumer capitalism,
the forms of microcultural expression it describes can also be read
as entangled with the processes of commodification. The emphasis
on carnivalesque partying might be seen as a fulfilment of consumer
society’s compulsory hedonism, while the ideal of identity as a con-
stantly shifting performance to which the characters subscribe would
seem to bear out the critique of subcultural “schizophrenia” advanced
in recent subculture theory.1 On the other hand, the novel marks out
certain microcultural practices and rituals as forms of resistance within
consumer capitalism. The intensities of aesthetic expression, perform-
ance, dance, drugs and sexual practice central to the queer world as
they are 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.
There is certainly a romanticising tendency in a narrative—and in
a critical reading of such a narrative—that would locate resistance
in such “escape attempts,” which would seem to have little direct
political efficacy—which can, it would seem, only ever be “potentially
political,” as Meaghan Morris notes in a critique of theories that read
popular culture as the evasion of disciplinary pressures (465).2 But if
Chemical Palace often stresses that the hedonistic and creative activ-
ities crystallised in the parties are evasions of the workaday and the
“straight”—momentary modes of being in which the characters “truly [come] alive” (167)—it is also the case that partying is construed as an extension of a lived, minoritarian ethos centred around the valorisation of sexual diversity and aesthetic expression, and a critique of the materialism of “whitegoods and mortgages.” In this respect, the novel’s representation of the queer microculture challenges the argument of contemporary theorists that, within postmodernity at least, subcultures are more about shopping in “the supermarket of style” than they are about the constitution of alternative values (Muggleton; Polhemus, “In the Supermarket of Style”).

For these reasons, the novel’s figuration of social minoritisation can be related to a more optimistic conception of the minor than that proposed by subculture theorists: that contained within Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of a “minor literature.” A minor literature is written from within a dominant discourse—what Deleuze and Guattari call a “major language”—but also writes against it in the interests of a minoritised social grouping. In honouring a microculture barely discernible or intelligible within dominant discursive paradigms (and here I would disagree with the contention that postmodern subcultures are always already “mediatised,” as the scene of which McGregor writes has very little, if any, mass-media presence), McGregor’s novel fulfils Deleuze and Guattari’s dictum that in a minor literature the writer speaks on behalf of a neglected collectivity. A minor literature, Deleuze and Guattari write, “finds itself positively charged with the role and function of collective, and even revolutionary, enunciation” (17). Through his or her engagement with the energies of a specific minority community, transfigurative potential accrues to the writer’s work, enabling “the possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility” (Deleuze and Guattari, 17). Deleuze and Guattari’s rather grandiose notions of revolutionary change may perhaps not seem quite appropriate for McGregor’s relatively modest project. But it is nonetheless important for an understanding of Chemical Palace, I’m suggesting, to register the ways in which it posits microcultural practices as oppositional social energies. For instance, the book frequently emphasises the way in which, in the preparation of the parties, a great deal of “passion” and “labour” goes into “play” (343), an emphasis that directly recalls the strain of Marxist thought, perhaps most famously elaborated by Herbert Marcuse, in which “the transformation of toil... into play” may enable a redemption of the conditions of
capitalism (Marcuse 193). In Chemical Palace this process is realised in partying, and partying in turn is shown to contribute to the formation of "another consciousness and sensibility" at both individual and collective levels.

Again in accordance with Deleuze and Guattari’s definition of minor literature, Chemical Palace departs significantly from the orthodoxies of major-literary expression. While I would not want to make any large claims for the innovativeness of this text—it is obviously indebted to various avant-garde literary movements—it is nonetheless the case that the novel’s formal qualities mark it as significantly different from, say, nearly all the other novels alongside which it was shortlisted for the New South Wales Premier’s Literary Awards in 2003. 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. Punctuation, indentation and paragraphing are idiosyncratic, and the frequently unconventional typography recalls the techniques of concrete poetry and more rigorously experimental fiction. Narrative passages are interrupted by the lyrics from dance tracks, citations from such diverse sources as St John of the Cross and a Fantales wrapper, pastiches of community radio interviews, and several lists—for instance, of hankie codes and "USEFUL ACTIVITIES FOR THE RESTLESS SPEED FREAK" (212). With its collagist mode, the novel might be seen as a typical postmodern cultural production; according to many theorists, textual collage constitutes an appropriate aesthetic response to the bewildering fragmentation and heterogeneity of the postmodern condition. Complementing these departures from the formal conventions of major-literary expression, the narrative of Chemical Palace is rambling and resolutely undramatic. Hardly a traditional 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. However, the rudiments of a more conventional plot of personal transformation can also be discerned in the novel’s treatment of its main character, traffic, who moves from a galvanising romantic involvement, through a descent into habitual drug use, illness, isolation and uncertainty, to emerge at the end with
Deleuze and Guattari argue that in a major literature the familiarity of the narrative content entails a facility of expression: “that which conceptualizes well expresses itself” (28). In a minor literature, by contrast, they argue, “one must find, discover or see the form of expression that goes with [the content]”; because of the unfamiliarity of its material, “a minor... literature begins by expressing itself and doesn’t conceptualize until afterward. Expression must break forms, encourage ruptures and new sproutings” (28). 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. If the novel’s aesthetic may to some extent be contextualised, say, within the paradigm of postmodernist collage, we should also note the specificities of this aesthetic. For instance, in its incorporation of lyrics from dance tracks, the novel sets up a range of intertextual reference that distinguishes it from other postmodern literary productions and that marks it as a form of expression appropriate to the queer microculture. In referencing dance lyrics and other texts such as the dance party flyer and the gay news article, the novel may be thought of as articulating with these kinds of subcultural expression; techniques of collage and bricolage enable the novel to contribute to the constitution of the microculture’s “fragile community” (Deleuze and Guattari 17).

The communitarian impetus of McGregor’s project can be inferred from a passage early in the novel in which the growth of the Sydney dance party scene in the 1990s is described. The narrator notes that “Gay was getting groovy, people were starting to take notice” and that journalists, tourists and other curious onlookers are coming into inner Sydney during party season “to capture” on film “the dress-ups, anyone on the street was public property” (27). The narrator continues: “Party animals could be careless about recording themselves. What really counted was the moment being lived, cameras were awkward the occasions private follies” (27). 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. In this respect, the novel’s project resembles that of the photography criticised in this passage. But the photography is presented as opportunistic (“caught unawares trashed or glamorous you didn’t have time to say yes or no before the shutter clicked”) and as reifying the enchantment of the ephemeral moment, so that the
other ly wild looks of partygoers are captured within the circuit of commodity exchange ("If you saw yourself in the files of a social photographer you could ask to buy a print") (27). The novel, on the other hand, through its sympathy and intimacy with the microcultural scene seeks to distinguish its project from what it defines as photographic "capture."

If *Chemical Palace* offers itself as a relatively enduring record of the ephemeral dance party scene, on another level the novel is itself shot through, if not quite with ephemerality, then with a sense of the rapid flux of the contemporary urban environment—what Paul Virilio, giving a common word a special emphasis, terms the speed of industrial and postindustrial life (Virilio). In limning a particular historical moment, the novel seems almost wilfully to court the built-in obsolescence of postmodern temporality: its references to matters such as the political crisis over refugees and sniffer dogs in Sydney nightclubs, topical at the time of its publication in September of 2002, already seem dated.

The novel variously celebrates, critiques, and registers the pathos of a life lived at postmodern speed. Its more jaundiced account of this dynamic is evinced in its representation of the decline of the dance party scene associated with the inexorable gentrification of the inner city. Sydney's raffish edge is dulled by the mushroom-like sprouting of "luxury apartments" (311); the sale to developers of the warehouse where several of the characters live seems to them "[t]he world ending" (360). The bohemian queer scene, always embattled in the novel, is increasingly crowded out by a crass, homogenised, and over-regulated commercial culture manifested, for instance, in metastasising poker machines in pubs, the aforementioned sniffer dogs, and in the police stopping and searching people for drugs. The community of friends we are introduced to in the first half of the novel drifts apart in the second half partly as a result of these pressures: one character wonders where her erstwhile companions were "meeting on Sundays now there was no gay pub without poker machines or video screen?" (320). An "alternative looking" gay man and lesbian from Melbourne, bewildered at the paucity of "groovy" venues in Sydney, stop another character on Oxford Street, asking him "what's happened to Sydney there used to be so many freaks on the streets" (354).

*Chemical Palace* thus stages an unequally weighted contest between the dissident microculture and the dominant forces of capital and government over the uses and meanings of the city. In the reminiscences of the characters and in the scattershot lyricism of the narrator's
descriptions, the novel offers a remapping of the city according to individual and collective memory, affect, and desire. In so doing, the novel resembles the racialised minor literatures of Los Angeles discussed by Julian Murphet, which aim imaginatively to reclaim urban territory, to contest the abstraction of capital by affect, and to “restitut[e] humane values through more or less moralistic denunciations of the existent” (29). In its lovingly detailed evocations of Sydney’s natural and built environments, the novel carries out a compensatory appropriation of an urban space that it sees as increasingly colonised by inhumane values. In a passage toward the end of the novel, the voice of the narrator merges with that of the characters in a lament for “all the uninhabited buildings, beautiful in their neglect, enticing as ballgowns worn for an evening then discarded.... Locked up by money bureaucracy and politics. Nowhere to live, nowhere to party. Please open up. Give us accommodation. Let us party, let us in” (361). Bureaucracy and politics here betray the promise of urban life, foreclosing the city’s potentially enriching cosmopolitanism. But if the incessant redevelopment of Sydney, “a city centuries old not yet built” with “a skyline sprouting cranes in every direction” (3), is experienced by the characters as a threat, in other ways the city’s mutability is seen as potentially positive. The passage about the closed up buildings, for instance, may be contrasted with another late passage in which the promise of change is inscribed in the city’s very topography: “Sydney. Hectic. Unplanned, unpredictable.... Sudden birdsong, sudden rainfall, sudden views across vacant lots and down sudden hills. You never knew what was around the corner” (358).

The book’s more optimistic view of the mutation and speed inherent within postmodern urbanity is most evident in its representation of elements of the party scene: the kinesis of dance, the transfigurations of drugs, the possibilities of self-creation and performance. The characters all invest in the impermanence characteristic of the urban experience, an attitude encapsulated in the reflection of Traffic’s first girlfriend, Billy, that what makes going out worthwhile is “the sight of new faces new people proof of change” (7). The novel emphasises the peripatetic dynamic of urban existence, and the unpredictable coalitions and dispersals that this dynamic effects, making much of the provisionality—but also the serendipity—of the connections between people generated in the context of the party culture. The character, Traffic, and a “man with a rooster tattoo” sustain an ongoing, albeit fragmentary, friendship, despite the fact that neither
can ever remember the other’s name. Jo, otherwise known as Slip, reflects that her new alias—given her by her flatmate as she embarks on a new career as a DJ—provides “the lie or the possibility of a new beginning. Because [she and the other characters] had all most likely crossed paths many times over the years [at parties and other venues] before formal acquaintance…. To think we passed each other on the street, on the dancefloor, never knowing we’d end up friends years later” (50). (Again, the movement from third person to collective pronoun indicates the novel’s unabashed implication in, and championing of, the queer community).

The last party described in the book combines the ideas of speed and motility that characterise its treatment of the queer scene. The party is in fact named Fast, “because,” as one character puts it, “time’s running out” (337). But if in its name the party references the cultural changes that spell doom for the queer scene, the party’s realisation is represented as an almost triumphant manifestation of the positive potentials of speed. The party is a private one—like the ones from which, we are told on the first page, the other public parties grew—which travels between the homes of the various characters, all transformed into elaborate fantasy environments. This movement between various private venues is punctuated by an interlude in which the partygoers carry out a faked gangland shooting at Kings Cross, thereby momentarily and spectacularly commanding a public space in which they are otherwise symbolically marginalised and literally often subjected to verbal and physical abuse.5

In depicting the queer scene in terms of movement and flux, the novel’s representation resonates with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s usage of “queer” to denote a transfiguring motion across categories. Sedgwick notes that “the word queer itself means across,” and queer as she deploys it signals movements “across genders, across sexualities, across genres, across ‘perversions’” (xii). For Sedgwick, queering implies a making-strange of identities and entities, a derangement and reconfiguration of conventional taxonomies. Most of the queer traversals—across genders, across sexualities, across perversions—set out by Sedgwick are evident in Chemical Palace, and they are often combined with and overlaid upon movements across the spaces of the city. In the face of repression, the novel insists upon the city’s queer potential; the Fast party, with its wildly transvestite, terroristic play-acting in the streets of the Cross constitutes only its most emphatic queering of the city.6
The qualities that the book valorises—performance, ephemerality, queering—are most apparent in the figure of traffic, the main character. It might seem odd for there to be anything like a main character in a book so preoccupied with forms of community; but here again, Deleuze and Guattari’s argument about minor literature proves useful as a means of accounting for this apparent anomaly. The “cramped space” of minor literature, they write, “forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics. The individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it” (17). It is in the figure of traffic that the book’s oppositional politics of pleasure and performativity are crystallised, and it is in the arc of her story that the dissidence and the constraining entanglements of the microcultural ethos are brought into relief.7

Collateral with her status as the most elaborately “queer” figure in the novel, traffic is the most hyperkinetic character, her very name denoting motion. Even when not on the drugs that she habitually uses for much of the narrative, traffic “[can] not stop moving” (295). At one point her friend Holmes reflects that “he never knew anyone who could speed and eat simultaneously, but then again traffic did everything simultaneously” (257). The book emphasises traffic’s investment in mutation and expendability. When she falls in love with Billy, traffic also falls “for an ethos she initially thought they shared. A life that was lived and not saved up for, a daily creation.... traffic threw away all of her plans when Billy was just getting around to making them” (31). Another passage describing traffic’s devotion to the ephemeral reinvokes the opposition of photography and performance. traffic, looking at her friend Turkish Jim’s photos, which have been taken over many years, and which record his multiple “lives” and personae, remembers her attendance at some of the parties depicted “but rarely what she’d worn. She had never owned a camera. traffic kept no records, she threw things away” (104). traffic hates work, responsibility, respectability, possessions. She “long[s] to long for material stability but the only thing that held her with any consistency was the unknown” (303). traffic is constantly in a “rush” (257) toward what the book more than once calls “freedom,” an impulse metaphorised in her learning to juggle, a skill that she eventually incorporates into the performances she puts on at an alternative cabaret night and a children’s party in the final pages of the book. Juggling, of course, involves the mastery of continuous motion; as traffic’s tutor points
out, connecting it to the one of the novel’s other valorised forms of kinesis, it is “all about” “rhythm,” “a kind of dancing” (219). When traffic finally manages a three-ball juggle the moment is epiphanic: “like green lights all the way down Cleveland Street, the eye of the storm, like riding a wave, freedom, flying” (295).

The presentation of traffic as uncontainably nomadic obviously risks a rather banal romanticism, but this possibility is, I think, militated against by the narrative’s emphasis on the isolation and “fear” (269) that are the concomitants of traffic’s putting her worldview into practice. Moreover, in its representation of her drug view of the pitfalls of this particular line of flight that counterbalances its account of the transformative possibilities of drugs elsewhere. traffic’s crystal addiction is replete with bad hits, solipsism and paranoid delusions; and, beyond this specific representation, the novel adduces “increasing crystal casualties with nowhere to go” (322) as evidence of the grim changes overtaking Sydney at its denouement.

traffic’s hyperactivity, her status as “a constantly changing picture” (362), might be read—accurately I think—as epitomising the dynamics of consumer capitalism, and therefore as allegorising the implication of the microculture within the broader culture against which it defines itself. At the same time, however, these aspects of her character, by emphasising the ephemeral nature of performance, indicate one of the key ways in which the queer scene might be thought of as undermining commodification. Toward the end of the novel, traffic decides to perform as a clown at her eight-year-old nephew’s birthday rather than present him with a tangible gift. Though this decision is motivated partly by a lack of money, traffic also considers that in performing she will be giving her nephew “something of herself, something incorporeal, something of herself by herself. Those were the best presents anyway, the unexpected, the personal and homemade” (356). Paradoxically, this “incorporeal” present of performance is thoroughly embodied; the notion of the performance’s incorporeality points up its status as a gift, which, because it is ephemeral, evades the circuit of commodity exchange. Similarly, traffic’s birthday gift to her new girlfriend Slip—a transformation of Slip’s body into “a cello, a double bass” through the piercing of her skin with needles and the attachment of strings—is described as “folk art” (368), an aesthetic category that, like “the personal, the homemade,” is imagined as outside the ambit of commodification; but this gift is in fact only situated outside commodity culture because, unlike actual folk
art or homemade artefacts, which can very well be commodified, it
is fugitive, unrepeatable. In the passage describing the photographing
of “party animals” from which I’ve already quoted, the narrator
notes that some are happy to be captured on film, without thought
of monetary recompense, because “they were hungry for the smallest
acknowledgement having strutted so long before silence or jeers. The
giving had no limits because performance was a habit a custom a way
of life. Performance was life itself” (27). If performance in the novel
is frequently figured as a gift, a labour of love, however, the giving is
not always limitless. Traffic and her friends are incensed when they
discover that photographs of traffic and other performers at a party
are being sold without their permission. They contact “a woman at
the Arts Law Centre” who tells them “nothing can be done without
proof of contract” and that “performers have virtually no rights”
(183). Within the context of a culture based on commodity exchange,
the value of the gift of performance is unintelligible and incalculable.8

But if Chemical Palace presents the ephemeral as constantly in
danger of co-optation and reification, it also vests its strongest opti-
mism within this category. Although the novel’s depiction of Sydney
ultimately verges on the dystopian, and although there seems little
hope at the end for a revival of the once vibrant underground dance
party scene, the emphasis throughout the narrative on the trans-
formative possibilities inherent within dance culture suggest that it
must, like a kind of repressed unconscious of the city, return in some
form. Reminiscing about Sydney in the early 1980s, Slip, after listing
the dramatic contrasts between the city of that time and the city of
today, concludes: “But these are mere details. Material things always
change quickly. The basics were the same.... 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). Here
the ephemeral is paradoxically located as a continuity within metropo-
litan life, an ongoing manifestation of alternative, “transcendent”
ergies, which eclipses the “mere details” of cultural mutation. The
book places considerable hope in the fact that in metropolitan life, as
another character observes in relation to a supposedly fallow period
on the party scene, “It wasn’t true there was nothing happening.
There always was and always will be something happening” (38).
Notes
1 On the mandatory nature of hedonism in consumer capitalism, see, among others, Daniel Bell, *Cultural Contradictions*, and Colin Campbell, *Romantic Ethic*.
2 I borrow the term "escape attempts" from an example of the kind of theory that Morris critiques: Stanley Cohen and Laurie Taylor's *Escape Attempts: The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Everyday Life*.
3 For an ethnographically focused discussion of the continuities between dance party practice and everyday life, see Jonathan Bollen, "Queer Kinaesthesia."
4 The obvious irony here is that *Chemical Palace* is as much a commodity as the photographs of party animals that are bought and sold. But the irony is not, I'd suggest, a very interesting one. *Chemical Palace* depicts a world in which commodification is, in important respects, inescapable; but it doesn't follow from the fact that people and artefacts are subject to commodification that criticism of and resistance to consumer capitalism are always "captured." It is the novel's attempt to critique commodification "from within" that interests me in this essay.
5 Instances of such abuse include an episode in which, walking home, the "outrageously made-up" Billy is sworn at by "men from the corner pub" (64), and one in which traffic and Slip get involved in a fight with a drunken young man after he "jeer[s] the usual epithets" (283).
7 This simultaneous dissidence and constraining entanglement is evident in the presentation of traffic's sexual practice, the novel's most salient instatement of the queering of genders and sexualities. The emphasis in the scenes of traffic's sexual practice is very much on penetration—either by fists, dildos or strap-ons. The novel thus makes a forthright "pro-sex" intervention in a long-standing debate within lesbian communities over whether penetration represents non-reciprocal eroticism, and whether penetration by a dildo or strap-on in particular offensively implies that lesbian sex is in need of the supplement of a "male" part. The novel corresponds with the "pro-sex" position by suggesting that the use of phallic prostheses, rather than denoting the enthrallment of lesbians to maleness, in fact denaturalises heterosexual masculinity by "reterritorializing the culturally constructed aura of the p signifier male anatomy inherent in the dildo, as pro-sex lesbian arguments often do, *Chemical Palace* queerly embraces it. As is frequently indicated, traffic thinks of herself as a boy, or, better a combination of girl and boy, a self-conception sustained by and realised in her use of the strap-on. But if the dildo thus enables the possibility of a queer self-invention in which distinctions between male and female and hetero- and homosexuality are thrown into doubt, it is also the case, as Cathy Griggers argues, that a devotion to the mass-produced dildo points up the implication of postmodern sexual identities within "the commodity logic of techno-culture" (184).
8 Performance's evasion of commodification is a key motivation within performance art from the 1960s on. For an important argument that develops this insight about performance and that uses performance art as illustration, see Peggy Phelan, "The Ontology of Performance."
Works Cited


