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“Pharmakon” and “Pharmakos” Prolegomena for a Janus-Faced Modernity

Intact cultures possess a knowledge of the benefits of drug-related pathways to altered consciousness, as well as a wisdom that leads them to incorporate drugs ... into the techniques that construct the reality of its people. Western culture stands out as an exception to this universal cultural characteristic.

John Schumaker

... we are still foreign to ourselves, at the threshold of this “new world,” ... “We” have no idea who “we” are, no idea what is inside “us.”

Catherine Malabou

Counterpoint, not other

No one would claim today that modern notions of culture, to the extent that they have fueled the literary critic's work, are devoid of trajectories of disavowal. When concepts become metaphors and generate desires toward self-evidence in the exploration of unheeded territories, it might be time to take a third look. Many stories are yet to be told, if we believe that theoretical works are renarrations of a specific kind. I would like to offer one such story. It takes Fernando Ortiz's renowned and much commented book, *Contrapunto cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* (1940/78; *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*) on a journey back “home,” where culture and history, and biology are not perceived as opposites. If much incentive has been gained from Ortiz's work for making transculturation studies a first-rank issue in Latin American literary criticism,¹ an entire realm was put aside: the field of the relationships between culture and biology. However, *Cuban Counterpoint* offers crucial insights into the problematic of “modernity and intoxication,” enabled by a perspective that fosters the experiences and

¹ See for the Spanish edition Fernando Ortiz, *Contrapunto cubano del tabaco y el azúcar*. Ed. Julio Le Riverent.

² On the notion of transculturation see Fernando Coronil, “Introduction to the Duke University Press Edition,” in Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, xvii, xxx.

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epistemic interests of what today appears as the Global South. This study makes the two psychoactives, tobacco and sugar, the master objects of a heterological approach to modernity. The fact that these substances do not fall under the biased notion of "malignant," legally restricted drugs lends *Counterpoint* a special usefulness for comparative discussion. While it questions the rationale, according to which narcotic desire carries the assumption of pathology, it scrutinizes the role that narcotic plants from the New World have played, across the centuries, in the transatlantic formation of Western modernity. This is no minor aspect, since modernity's involvement with drugs has been accompanied by mechanisms of (self)repression, and the fact that public debates on narcotics have become increasingly difficult merits critical review. When the work of Ortiz was eagerly appropriated since the 1970s, the search for national, "transcultural" identities made Latin American imaginaries compete with the idea of universal citizenship. To decode modernity's tales of projection and repression, in turn, brings peripheral thinking to the forefront of global reflection.

In a wider connotation, our study considers the *humanum* not as a "process" essentially driven by labor, work, and action,³ but as a "rhythmic" reality, as well, in which biological and anthropological forces play their constant part. It is here that the image of the *counterpoint* comes into focus, as it can make us aware of the age-old, psychotropic element of human practice.⁴ "Psychotropy," understood in principle as being related to mood- and consciousness-altering substances and practices, conveys a sturdy counterpoint in the life of "homo faber," its sturdiness consisting of the shifting layers of meaning that undo, as well as "back up," humanity's rationalizing fervor. Ortiz enters the stage of early-twentieth-century cultural theory as a Latin American and a global thinker. He locates the Cuban riches, tobacco and sugar, within the genealogy of modernity's ever present yet disavowed signifier—narcotics. Narcotics are never homogeneous, as their compositions and effects vary; however, all of them work on the chemical messengers of the neuropsychological system. In so doing, their effects combine with other factors—cultural and environmental—that also work on the brain-body-chemistry. This field of unique combinations, that are both biologically and culturally charged, has given the problematic its tremendous and contradictory scope, often being divided between "biopoetic" and "biopolitical" approaches.

Fernando Ortiz's point of departure is figurative and theatrical: "dark tobacco" and "high yellow sugar" perform an allegorical dance, as they conduct their symbiotic, syncretic action on peoples' bodies and souls, displaying a contest of contrasting ethics and the ills and benefits that each has conferred upon mankind.⁵ In the course of his book, the Cuban anthropologist works toward a new awareness regarding the ancient "pharmakon," showing how, beginning with the sixteenth century, an increasingly widespread intoxication, fueled by overseas commerce and mass commodification of tobacco, sugar, and other "pharmaka" was a modern phenomenon, transatlantically charged. As is often overlooked, Western modernity is deeply involved with narcotics, in biochemical or cultural, and of course in literary ways. This involvement is based,

on the dark side of progress, on the prosperity of the colonial labor treadmill, with sugar standing at the origin of the introduction of African slaves into the hemispheric colonies.⁶ "Pharmakon," in Greek, stands for poison, or magic potion, or medicine; and it may well be the shifting signifier that embraces all three. This, together with a perspective that plays on a hegemonic take by turning the mirror of sophisticated Othering onto Europe—tobacco from Cuba eventually mellowed into "Holy smoke"⁷ in order to furnish the mythology of urban progress and cosmopolitan identities—is what *Contrapunto* is about, while at the same time offering a genuine cultural and economic history of Cuba's two main export products.

Why, then, have cultural analysts, or Latin American literary and cultural studies, as well as postcolonial thinking, paid only fitful attention to the matter? Why did they overlook its genuine conceptual, and genealogical call? While cultural critics are accustomed to thinking of globalization in terms of power configurations related to capitalism, coloniality, the nation-state, Otherness, gender, immigration, and the mass media, most have neglected the formative role of modern struggles over narcotics in these regards. In a sense, narcotics and intoxication (which are not the same) continue to linger on as modernity's visceral "Other," one that the "Self" has to disavow in order to keep utilizing it. Since affective expectations and aversions haunt scholarly work beneath its performed objectivity, fear of the possible delusion of the idea of the self-conscious subject might have played a part in the underestimation of Ortiz's most obvious concern: a kind of Latin American epistemic, ethnographic, and poetic protagonism in the global venture, in which "actors" such as "tobacco" and "sugar" would stimulate and embellish the culture of the European and North American centers, thus restituting economic income and symbolic authority to the less privileged Caribbean world. *Cuban Counterpoint* can thus be read as a bio-poetic manifesto.⁸ When the book was written, uncontrolled use of tobacco and sugar was not illegal, in contrast with other psychoactive substances that fell under prohibition; however, the question of which of these substances are more detrimental to health, and which are particularly generative of addictive consequences, as well as the question of their cultural "identities," remain contradictory issues. For example, the existing moral and legal separations between alcohol and sugar, on the one hand, and hashish and cocaine, on the other, are nothing less than arbitrary. There might also have been, among humanities' scholars skeptical of psychoactives, a rather narrow secularism, which leads to the association of narcotics and stimulants with those irrational spheres that belonged to religion or vanity, but not modern culture. If, on the other hand, readers of

⁶ See ibid., 33–4, 48–57, 84.

⁷ Friedrich Erdmann Petri (ed.), *Handbuch der Fremdwörter in deutscher Schrift- und Umgang-Sprache Zweiter Theil*, Dresden—Leipzig: Arnoldische Buchhandlung, 1834, 232.

⁸ See Guillermo Cabrera Infante, *Holy Smoke*.

⁹ The text begins with the poet priest Juan Ruiz's *Libro de Buen Amor* (1330/43), especially the "Pelea que uno Don Carnal con Doña Quaresma" or, in Ortiz's diction, the satirical contest between "Don Tabaco" and "Doña Azúcar," a creaturely (partly allegorical) relationship imagined to be both a convention and a dance. In the event that, with "Don Tabaco's" aid, sublime intoxication is possible, can it help provide stamina to the "personality" in modern times to endure in their oppressed existence? (see Ortiz, *Contrapunto*, 297–8, 309).

³ See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 7.

⁴ For a cultural reflection on "psychotropy" see Daniel L. Small, *On Deep History and the Brain*, 157.

⁵ Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint*, 3.

Ortiz's book had taken note of Walter Benjamin's "Capitalism as Religion" (1921) and "Surrealism" (1929), and especially his concept-figure of a "dialectics of intoxication," different ideas about modernity's transgressions and the singular counterpoints of psychoactives offered to the West by peripheral cultures might have come our way several decades sooner.¹⁰

It is essential to our argument that Ortiz was a "nonspecialist" in the study of drug use and abuse. We are not heading toward free speculation on a controversial matter, but rather an approach that is capable of making sense of the paradoxes traversing narcotic substances, together with psychoactive "realities" as they have marked the rise and self-fashioning of Western modernity. As far as "specialists" are concerned, Richard DeGrandpre's *The Cult of Pharmacology* (2006) has necessary things to say, for example, about the "biased objectivity" of the pharmaceutical guild. Regarding the first decades of the twentieth century, a time during which the contemporary drug control and enforcement system, pioneered by the United States,¹¹ acquired its lasting, international contours, DeGrandpre comments:

The pharmaceutical industry, the tobacco industry, modern biological psychiatry, the biomedical sciences, the drug enforcement agencies, and the American judicial system—all these institutions were quick to embrace and promote a cult of pharmacology not as a conspiracy but as a belief system that served their own interests, albeit in varying ways. (viii)

"Cult" is a synonym for the practical, often highly efficient (re)production of specific belief systems or affective dispositions classifying drugs as either "angels" or "demons," which we have discussed, in another study, in relationship to a global "war on affect."¹² Here we have the first paradox: science on the one hand, and belief or fear on the other, each coupled with powerful interests.¹³ In the course of his study, DeGrandpre points to the establishment of a discursive order that resembles Edward Said's idea of orientalism.¹⁴ At issue is a mechanism for making Otherness subject to judgment by affectively, as well as "systematically," constructing it in the first place. DeGrandpre applies the figure of "orientalism," common among postcolonial scholars, to the trajectories of mystification, which have come to characterize a major part of the modern history of narcotics. Psychoactives have become, by means of both imagination and explanation, a hyperbole—a symbol for excess—their cultivators, in the case of

psychoactive plants that have been condemned and their users, being qualified as dangerous Others that call for moral scrutiny, restriction, and even coercion.

Today, a wide spectrum of scientific investigations and ethical considerations convene in the plea for rigorously improved and democratized drug education.¹⁵ This implies, in the first place, readdressing the problematic of psychoactive substances in differentiated, nonbelligose ways, putting in doubt the politics of suspicion and punishment. David Lenson, questioning the reigning spirit of criminalization, writes, "The question should be: how can we allow people to get high safely, without imperiling their capacity for work, love, and citizenship?" (190). Our present study, articulated from a literary theorist's perspective, bears a more modest and yet more extensive claim. At stake is a "third," historico-cultural look at modernity and its hermeneutic and conceptual crucibles, one that pierces through the twilight spirit of our present, trying to recover some of the most important symbolic traces and historical antecedents underlying the conflicts over narcotics. At stake is, in other words, a *new perspective of sobriety* in view of the heated vocabulary related to "illicit flows and criminal things,"¹⁶ which often goes together with historical forgetting and social, psychological, or ethnic exclusion. Yet "sobriety" is not a puristic notion, but one that allows us to look through intoxication by understanding its fundamental role.¹⁷ As we will argue in our book, the plea for sobriety speaks from contemporary literature's perception of the world and, especially, its reimagination of the "pharmakon."

Remembering the "Psychoactive Revolution": Provincializing the West

When Dipesh Chakrabarty conceived of the arguments for *Provincializing Europe*,¹⁸ he did not address the one single signifier whose entrance into Western imagination produced rampant evidence of superstition, fear, and narrow-mindedness on the side of European conquerors and colonizers: psychoactive plants and the practices of their use by the autochthonous populations of the "West Indies." Rethinking a "modern history of intoxication" appears to be an important step for bringing the critique of historicism up to date. Today, over 500 years after the transatlantic onset of Western expansion, the word "drugs" resonates with either suspicion or excess, together with narcotics having become mass commodities—extremely diversified, highly profitable, and eagerly restricted; alas, we live in a world in which the notions of excess and fear evoke, not by chance, a sense of immaturity regarding the ways in which contemporary

¹⁰ See Hermann Herlinghaus, "(In)Comparable Intoxications: Walter Benjamin Revisited from the Hemispheric South," 16–36.

¹¹ See David W. Courtwright, *Forces of Habit: Drugs and the Making of the Modern World*, 183, 184–6. The author notes: "When most people hear the phrase 'drug trafficking,' they think of criminals scheming to bypass strict prohibitions on nonmedical sales and use. Viewed in historical terms, this sort of activity is a peculiarity of modern times. From about the mid-seventeenth century to the late nineteenth, the worlds governing elites, with a few notable exceptions were concerned with how best to tax the traffic, not how to suppress it. Prohibition would have struck them as futile and wasteful, had they thought of it at all" (165).

¹² See Hermann Herlinghaus, *Violence Without Guilt: Ethical Narratives from the Global South*, 8–16.

¹³ "Like all technologies, pharmacology is essentially ambivalent. It can promote health, or it can be employed to tame and control populations," David Lenson, *On Drugs*, 191.

¹⁴ See Edward Said, *Orientalism*.

¹⁵ An example, here, would be Buzzard, *The Straight Facts About the Most Used and Abused Drugs from Alcohol to Ecstasy* by Cynthia Kuhn, Scott Swartzwelder, Wilkie Wilson. See 18–19.

¹⁶ See Willem van Schendel and Ily Abraham (eds.), *Illicit Flows and Criminal Things: States, Borders, and the Other Side of Globalization*.

¹⁷ Sobriety, in our discussion, does not stand for an absolute, nor is it equated positivistically with the word "drug free." As we will elaborate in Chapter 2, it is an unfamiliar concept to the extent that it forms part of the "dialectics of intoxication" heralded by Walter Benjamin.

¹⁸ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*.

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societies handle their basic, bio-anthropological issues. If late modernity is about globalization, is it not also about the obsessive particularisms through which ruling elites try to secure their domains, geopolitically and locally? Or, to recall a cast of neoliberalist cynicism vis-à-vis our troubled world—chaos management should be profitable, in the first place.

Regarding the first European encounter with tobacco leaves from the “New World,” Ortiz observes:

When Christopher Columbus stepped on American soil, for the first time in Guanahani on October 12, 1492, the Indians of the island greeted him with an offertory rite, a gift of tobacco: “Some dried leaves, which must be a thing highly esteemed among them, for in San Salvador they made me a present of them.” To give leaves of tobacco or a cigarette was a gesture of peace and friendship among the Indians.... (14–15)

For the Admiral, tobacco was nothing other than an exotic rarity. Tobacco leaves were unknown in Europe until the beginning of the sixteenth century (72). Similar scenes must have occurred regarding the Andean coca plant, of which Europe received its first account from a man, Amerigo Vespucci, whose misspelled name would dubiously account for the designation of the new lands. According to Joseph Kennedy, Vespucci wrote about his coca observations on the Island of Margarita in a letter:

The customs and manners of the tribe are of this sort. In looks and behavior they were very repulsive and each had his cheeks bulging with a certain green herb which they chewed like cattle, so that they could hardly speak....¹⁹

Irrespective of the arrogant blindness of European newcomers, coca and tobacco were “pharmaka” in the ancient sense of the word. They were untapped resources, and they came loaded with an invisible “call,” in that the distinction between remedy, magic, and poison was not a matter of science, in the first place, but of wisdom related to the experienced knowledges of culture and religiosity. Coca and tobacco were plants whose thousands-of-years old roles among native peoples of the Americas has been associated with medical use and combatting disorders of various kinds while they also served, at the same time, as central ingredients of autochthonous ways of life, agencies of shamanistic ceremonies and religious worship,²⁰ besides being praised as aphrodisiacs. Their pharmacological quality was linked to their relationships with the brain-body chemistry in biological, social, and cultural ways. According to Daniel Small’s neurohistorical perspective, mood- and consciousness-altering media have always existed, that is to say, culture and biology have never conformed a historicist

¹⁹ The citation continues “... and each carried from his neck two dried gourds, one of which was full of the very herb he kept in his mouth, the other full of a certain white flour-like powdered chalk. Frequently each put a small powdered stick (which had been moistened and chewed in his mouth) into the gourd filled with flour. Each they drew it forth and put it both sides on his cheeks thus mixing the flour with the herb their mouths contained. This they did frequently and a little at a time, and marveling at such a thing, we could not guess the secret nor for what purpose they did so.” Joseph Kennedy, *Coca Exotica: The Illustrated Story of Cocaine*, 31.

²⁰ See ibid., 15; Fernando Ortiz, *Contrapunto Cubano del tabaco y el azúcar*; Barbara Tedlock and Dennis Tedlock, *Teachings of the American Earth: Indian Religion and Philosophy*.

relationship in which the first would eventually replace the second.²¹ In that regard, and paraphrasing Latour, we indeed “have never been modern.”²² The Greek “pharmakon” and today’s pharmaceutical establishments, as well as their “pharmacological” discourses, seem to present themselves as opposites. However, they are connected via a phenomenology of conflicts, across many centuries, consisting of the struggles over narcotics, and what could turn one acceptance (that of dealing with remedies), or another (working with poisons) into the benefits of commerce, “enlightenment,” nation-building, and the invention—literally, the nurturing—of modern subjectivities, as well as their subsequent administration. If Western civilization did not bring an end to biology, one of modernity’s crucial problems, neurohistorically speaking, seemed to consist in the edification of increasingly aggressive and repressive “neurophysiological ecosystems.”²³ Narcotics not only became eagerly exchanged commodities within all major cycles of modernization, but they have moved to the center of ever accelerating consumerism and growing psychotropic saturation, without which contemporary lifestyles and cosmopolitan subject positions would be virtually unimaginable. This is what we call the formative power of modern conflicts over narcotics, which started with the encounter with the Americas and led to the invention of ever more sophisticated and arbitrary ways, in which geopolitics and economy would go hand in hand with the production, circulation, and control of psychotropic effects and consciousness-altering substances. On these grounds, modern writers and artists would eventually become engaged with narcotics’ movement to the center of a god-forsaken world.

Taking the vantage point of Latin American experiences regarding transatlantic expansion and exchange, and modifying Ortiz’s vision, imagining a counterpoint of tobacco and coca helps us to reveal specific imbalances. Both tobacco and coca were plants of indigenous origin and tradition from the Western hemisphere, cultigens that aroused the suspicion and the fascination of conquerors, colonizers, chroniclers, merchants, the Catholic church, transatlantic trading companies, chemists, biologists, artists, and writers. The coca leaf did not function as a catalyst of the large “psychoactive revolution,”²⁴ that started during the seventeenth century, whereas tobacco was one of its protagonists. Cocaine, invented as late as 1860, would fall prey to the prohibition of its free use only a few decades later; and from that time on, the Andean coca plant would be stigmatized on highly imprecise grounds.²⁵ Tobacco, on the other hand, and most likely more detrimental to health than cocaine, continued to be one of the main products serving modern societies’ limbic obsession and big economic interests:

the cigarette is... the boon companion of industrial capitalism and high-density urbanism. Crowds, hyperkinesis, mass production, numbingly boring labor, and social upheaval all have correlatives in the cigarette... For women, the *Atlantic Monthly* noted in 1916, the cigarette was “the symbol of emancipation, the temporary substitute for the ballot.”²⁶

²¹ See Daniel Small, *On Deep History*, 126–9, 154–5.

²² See Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*.

²³ Daniel Small, 155.

²⁴ David W. Courtwright, *Forces of Habit*, 1–2, 166–75.

²⁵ See Benjamin Dangl, *The Price of Free Resource Wars and Social Movements in Bolivia*, 38.

²⁶ Jonathan Franzen, *How to Be Alone* (Essays), 148.

On the one hand, it is impossible to imagine the nineteenth and twentieth centuries without cigarettes; but it would also be hard to hold, on the other, that drugs whose public use is being declared illegal from the early 1900s onward lose their impact on modern life, physiologically, culturally, and economically speaking. Medicine, the pharmaceutical industries, and biopolitics have been working together to determine how, and to what extent, deliberately to "poison" peoples' bodies; those collaborative networks were not disinterested, and their decisions were considerably ambivalent. Today, the situation is all the more difficult to grasp, as the shifting politics of medicalization, the existence of increasing amounts of synthetic drugs (not all of them recognizable as such), and the pressures that hinder competent public discussions have made the field so obtuse that it seems impossible to sketch out a big picture. However, recuperating the relationship between psychoactives and culture has become an issue without which the knowledge of life would be the affair of "experts" only.

To muse about this problematic, one might think of Derrida's words:

... the concept of drugs is not a scientific concept, but is rather instituted on the basis of moral or political evaluations: it carries in itself both norm and prohibition, allowing no possibility of description or certification—it is a decree, a buzzword (*mot d'ordre*). Usually the decree is of a prohibitive nature; occasionally, on the other hand, it is glorified and revered: malediction and benediction always call to and imply one another. As soon as one utters the word "drugs," even before any "addiction," a prescriptive or normative "diction" is already at work, performatively, whether one likes it or not. This "concept" will never be a purely theoretical or theorizable concept. And if there is never a theorem for drugs, there can never be a scientific competence for it either, one attestable as such and which would not be essentially overdetermined by ethico-political norms.²⁷

This was *not* always the case, however, and one would have to be alert to not taking the framework of the prohibitive turn, and the ensuing fears of deviation and pathology,²⁸ as the general historical and epistemic rule. The discourse on drugs became mythically overloaded during the twentieth century. This discourse has become "provincialized" to the extent that, in the most advanced countries, scientific development and applied science could not prevent that rhetorics of condemnation and denial would aid the new rules for narcotics administration which were established and fixed by treaties and international conventions during the first decades of the twentieth century.²⁹ Has anyone ever spoken of psychoactive imperialism? And as we start to face the avatars of the twenty-first century, is this not one of the most dramatically understudied realms lingering in the past century's wake?

But let us take a step back. Relationships between modernity and psychoactive substances are marked by both conflict and imagination, imagination being driven by tropes such as transgression, prosperity, profit, happiness, fear, neurosis, dissociation.

²⁷ Jacques Derrida, "The Rhetoric of Drugs," 20.

²⁸ See David Lenson, *On Drugs*, 189.

²⁹ See Jonathan Franzen, *How to be alone*, 163; Eva Bertram, Morris Blachmann, Kenneth Sharpe, Peter Andreas, *Drug War Politics: The Price of Denial*.

To the big question of how the "psychoactive revolution" and the "psychoactive counterrevolution" can be read into one single picture there are still only precarious answers. The "psychoactive revolution," a term suggested by David T. Courtwright, refers to the production, exchange, and consumption of psychoactive substances as they figured at the core of Western expansion and colonization, and as they eventually became an enabling condition of modernity. Narcotics fetishism characterized the transatlantic politics of the world's governing elites from about the mid-seventeenth to the late-nineteenth century, when concerns about manufacturing and taxing drugs, rather than suppressing them, were dominant. "Drug taxation was the fiscal cornerstone of the modern state, and the chief financial prop of European colonial empires."³⁰ There have been, above all, four such substances: alcohol, nicotine, caffeine, and sugar. Because of the degree to which they became neuro-chemical stimulants and psycho-cultural factors around the world, they have been the most resistant to prohibition. Coffee, tea, and sugar keep the contemporary Western world on the go, just as coca chewing still keeps part of the Andes on the go.³¹ By the way, and citing from McKenna's *Food of the Gods*, "sugar abuse is the world's least discussed and most widespread addiction. . . . After alcohol and tobacco, sugar is the most damaging addictive substance consumed by human beings. Its uncontrolled use can be a major chemical dependence."³² Then there are the "little three" regulated substances: opium, cannabis, and coca (in their elaborated form, heroin, hashish / marijuana, and cocaine), less frequently consumed, and eventually restricted and prohibited. "Nevertheless, they remain highly profitable commodities. Tens of millions of people use them in crude form or in concentrated products. . . . These are what most people think of when they hear the word 'drugs.'"³³

In the course of several centuries, the globalization of psychoactive plants and their derivatives, several of which came from the New World, transformed habits and economies, affected the fantasies of millions of people, and changed existing ecosystems. Narcotics were indispensable commodities and psychoactive agents, destined both to second the practices of colonization and subjugation, on the one hand, and become fuels of industrial civilization, on the other. Significantly, the use of narcotics, along with tobacco, coffee, alcohol, and to a lesser degree opium and cannabis, would rank at the center of socioeconomic change and corresponding psychoactive conditioning in Western Europe and the United States, becoming a daily habit for masses of middle-class consumers—those who came to represent the modern individual in his or her exposure to the experiences of urbanization and industrialization. But looking backward from the twentieth century's scenarios of selective restriction and coercive control, we cannot but ask what happened at that invisible conjuncture when things started to turn around. There is no simple response, but we are certainly dealing with something quite different from a "natural" development, for example, politics that have increasingly developed on the basis of solid insights into the nature of benevolent narcotics versus pernicious and deadly ones.

³⁰ David Courtwright, *Forces of Habit*, 5.

³¹ See Dominic Streetfield, *Cocaine: An Unauthorized Biography*, 6.

³² Terence McKenna, *Food of the Gods: The Search for the Original Tree of Knowledge: A Radical History of Plants, Drugs, and Human Evolution*, 175.

³³ David Courtwright, 31.

On the meaning of dissociation, and the logics of denial

There's no simple, universal reason why people smoke, but there's one thing I'm sure of: they don't do it because they're slaves to nicotine. (Jonathan Franzen)

As a smoker, . . . I have come to distrust not only my stories about myself but all narratives that pretend to unambiguous moral significance. (J. F.)

Let us now take a closer look at the "counterpoint tobacco and coca." I will refer to the chiastic situation that characterizes modern appropriations of these psychactives. At the same time, a counterpoint can surprisingly decenter a reigning melody or set a dominant motive in a different light. Both coca and tobacco originate in premodern ecosystems, in which knowledge of the "pharmakon" was part of immanent realities, practices of everyday life, and the art of human experience which were not tamed by discourse. In other words, medicines and poisons could be one and the same thing without contradicting one another. What was implied in their use was "council woven into the fabric of real life."³⁴ To perceive coca or tobacco as gifts from the goddesses implied a basic attitude regarding the "institution" of the gift—respect, as well as immanent knowledge. In *Teachings of the American Earth*, Dennis and Barbara Tedlock comment on the blind alleys of Western consumerism:

When we adopted tobacco we turned it into a personal habit, and we have overused it to the point where it has killed many of us. The final irony is that there should be a righteous public campaign against this sacred gift of America, as if there were something inherently wrong with smoking. Beeman Logan, a Seneca medicine man, suggests that the trouble is with ourselves: tobacco kills us, he says, because we do not respect it.³⁵

A complementary observation could be made about the Andean coca plant, and the terrible mythologies that keep vampirizing its existence. To unlearn the stigmatization that the late modern legal discourse on drugs has placed on the millenarian tradition of chewing coca leaves ("la hoja sagrada") is not a moral question in the first place, but the rather simple issue of starting to use the appropriate words for a phenomenon that is easy to understand.³⁶ The coca leaf from the eastern slopes of the Andes, *Erythroxylum coca*, has an altogether different story and composition than does the alkaloid cocaine. It has been a way of life, a cultural gift, a tool for healing and a means for survival. The pathological concept of "addiction" which surfaced in Europe toward the end of the nineteenth century³⁷ was, and remains to be, incongruent with the phenomenon of "la hoja de coca" (the coca leaf). "If historically maligned by outsiders, including even twentieth-century United Nations drug control agencies, coca is a benign herb

essential to Andean cultures, in its use analogous to that of tea in Asia."³⁸ Here we find one of the powerful logics of denial—in the paradoxical tolerance of nicotine and the demonification of coca leaves, whose cultivators in Latin America are facing an ominous "war on drugs."

Cocaine, different from the coca leaf, is a powerful stimulant that, if used in high doses, especially through injection, can cause severe somatic and psychotic results.³⁹ Huge quantities of coca leaves are to process in order to obtain small amounts of cocaine. Cocaine is not massively consumed in the countries that traditionally grow the coca plant, such as Bolivia and Peru. The demand for the potent alkaloid stems from the Global North. However, to seek a medical or social rationale that could explain, *ex post facto*, the situation that cocaine is illegal whereas nicotine and alcohol are tolerated, and marketed in enormous amounts, would be problematic.⁴⁰ More specifically, the exclusion of cocaine versus the medical use of Ritalin and Prozac is, at least, ironic. DeGrandpre comments on the similarity between cocaine and Ritalin:

How can millions of children be taking a drug that is pharmacologically very similar to another drug, cocaine, that is not only considered dangerous and addictive, but whose buying, selling and using are also considered criminal acts? If you are confused by this mix of findings, you are not alone. This confusion is widespread in both scientific and medical communities as well, as is summarized in the conclusions of a 1995 study comparing the neuropharmacology of cocaine and Ritalin, reported in the *Archives of General Psychiatry*: "Cocaine, which is one of the most reinforcing and addictive of the abused drugs, has pharmacological actions that are very similar to those of methylphenidate (Ritalin), which is the most commonly prescribed psychotropic medication for children in the United States."⁴¹

The author then explains that the "usual" practice of thinking and judging—the one that has become generalized under the impact of affective politics and the dissemination of "everyday fear"⁴² since the onset of the twentieth century—treats drugs on heavily manichaean grounds as either benign or malign. Alcohol is implicitly denied the status of a drug, after the experiment of Prohibition was unsuccessful; perhaps because some major outlet was required to allow people to self-medicate under the pressure of stress, depression, and growing anxieties in a hurried world—nowadays the "never-ending stream of rapid-fire days and jelling nights."⁴³ "For most people alcohol is not a terribly dangerous drug—but it is a powerful drug, and must be treated accordingly. No one would take a powerful antibiotic or heart medication without the advice of a

³⁴ Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," 147.

³⁵ Dennis Tedlock and Barbara Tedlock, *Teachings*, xii.

³⁶ See Enayr Mervin Balderrama, *Historia de la coca: Los Yungas de Potosí y Tierra* (1550–1900); Paul Gootenberg, "Cocaine in Chains: The Rise and Demise of a Global Commodity";
³⁷ See Jacques Derrida, "The Rhetoric of Drugs," xli, 22.

³⁸ "Andean coca use is local, while cocaine is for export, and the fact that they share one alkaloid of many does not make them comparable drugs," Paul Gootenberg, *Andean Cocaine: The Making of a Global Drug*, 10.

³⁹ See Cynthia Kuhn et al., *Buzzed*, 210–11.

⁴⁰ See ibid., 213.

⁴¹ Richard DeGrandpre, *Ritalin Nation: Rapid-fire Culture and the Transformation of Human Consciousness: The Ritalin Nation*, 177.

⁴² I am using the expression of Brian Massumi. See B. M. (ed.), *The Politics of Everyday Fear*.
⁴³ Richard DeGrandpre, *Ritalin Nation*, 15.

physician. But alcohol is available to virtually anyone who wants to have it, without a prescription."⁴⁴ And we have not even begun to talk about the deadening effects of alcohol consumption, in particular its psychological effects, and its socio-spatial contexts, and the discharges of violence that it can generate.

What applies, to some extent, to all of these psychoactives is a prerogative that is as basic as it can easily be sidestepped when one "truth" is convoked to bury another, or when established disciplines and realms of knowledge are taken into service, provided that they can help block the "hybrid" knowledge⁴⁵ that is required to address complex questions. Because of the heavy

prejudice of treating drugs as inherently good or bad, we do not realize that the nature of a drug can be greatly altered simply by changing the manner in which it is used. As we should know from the narcotics used to kill our pain in the hospital, whether a drug is an angel or demon is really more a question of context and personal perspective than one of pharmacological destiny.⁴⁶

The matter of use also implies drawing the distinctions between oral use, inhaling, and injection, the latter two being more apt to cause effects of toxicity and addiction than the first.⁴⁷ When DeGrandpre suggests the term of the "placebo text" in relationship to narcotics use, this notion is not self-explanatory per se, but it helps us to speak of an *interlocking network of diverse factors* when to discussing the effects that specific drugs exert on specific bodies and minds, under specific circumstances and in view of specific psycho-affective blueprints, regarding individuals, groups, and public discourse.

Placebo text refers to any unwritten cultural script that, like a religious text, informs a group's beliefs and expectations about a given drug, animating the "drug effects" once the substance is taken. If by *placebo effect* one means an outcome produced not by a drug but by beliefs and expectations about a drug, then a placebo text becomes the cultural teachings, however subtle, that inform these beliefs and expectations. According to this view, once a substance is taken, beliefs and expectations join with the first-order pharmacological effects of the substance to mediate or animate the immediate and long-term effects attributed to the drug.⁴⁸

At this point, facing a problematic that relates to the first-order pharmacological effects of narcotics and, at the same time, to second-order effects that are embedded in belief systems and contextual factors, it comes to us as an additional insight that "intoxication" is not induced by narcotics alone. Belief and religion, once they turn into practices that actively engage the human body can also generate effects of psychoactive transgression and even dependence. We need concepts that can meaningfully mediate between first-order and second-order effects, one of which is that of *dissociation* that we will address in a moment.

⁴⁴ Cynthia Kuhn, et al., *Buzzed*, 33.

⁴⁵ See Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 1–12.

⁴⁶ Richard DeGrandpre, *Ritalin Nation*, 178.

⁴⁷ See Andrew Weil, *The Natural Mind: An Investigation of Drugs and the Higher Consciousness*, 113.

⁴⁸ Richard DeGrandpre, *The Call of Pharmacology*, 120–1. On the first-order pharmacological effects of the most used narcotics see Cynthia Kuhn et al.,

Our previous remarks may sound far-fetched from the angle of the culture of cognitive separations and disciplinary autonomy, as this has marked the differentiation of the modern repertoires of knowledge (nature, discourse, society, being⁴⁹), but the study of the outlined issues is a crucial task for cultural theorists and anthropologists who are not averse to loosening the borders between their fields and natural science studies. Hybrid thinking becomes all the more important when the reigning spheres of "quasi-objects"⁵⁰ and their domains of representation become insufficient for understanding the networks that connect life, bodies, minds, spaces, and histories. The "counterpoint of tobacco and coca" within modern cultural history,⁵¹ and especially within the conflicts over psychoactive empowerment and regulation in Europe, can now be addressed more pointedly. Compare, for example, Sigmund Freud's early writings about "coca"—later excluded from the *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*—and his late work *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930).

Twenty years before Freud wrote his 1884 essay, "Über Coca,"⁵² Albert Niemann, a chemistry graduate student in Göttingen, had isolated the alkaloid cocaine from a large amount of coca leaves. The young Freud, using the word "coca" but referring to cocaine, wrote six papers on cocaine between 1884 and 1887 and held public lectures on the subject at Vienna's physiological and psychiatric societies, becoming an important advocate of cocaine use, which he recommended to doctors and consumers. In "Über Coca," Freud, starting with a historical account of the coca leaf's use among Peruvian indigenous peoples and even referring to Garcilaso de la Vega's *Comentarios Reales de los Incas* (1609),⁵³ discusses the exhaustive biomedical experiments on the effects of cocaine that were undertaken between 1860 and 1887. He writes:

"The psychic effect of *cocainum muraticum* in doses of 0.05–0.10g consists of exhilaration and lasting euphoria, which does not differ in any way from the normal euphoria of a healthy person. The feeling of excitement, which accompanies stimulus by alcohol is completely lacking [...]. One senses an increase of self-control and feels more vigorous and more capable of work; on the other hand, if one works, one misses that heightening of the mental powers which alcohol, tea, or coffee induce. [...] This gives the impression that the mood induced by coca [cocainum; the author] in such doses is due not so much to direct stimulation as to the disappearance of elements in one's general state of well-being which cause depression.

[...] I have tested this effect of coca [cocainum; the author], which wards off hunger, sleep, and fatigue and steels one to intellectual effort, some dozen times on myself."⁵⁴

⁴⁹ See Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 89.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁵¹ On both substances, respectively, several comprehensive historical-cultural studies are available. Compare, for example, Richard Kluger: *Askes to Ashes: America's Hundred-Year Cigarette War, the Public Health, and the Unhushed Triumph of Philip Morris*; Richard Klein, *Cigarettes Are Sublime*. On the coca plant see W. Golden Mortimer's *History of Coca: The Divine Plant of the Incas*, and Joseph Kennedy's *Coca Revolution*.

⁵² See Sigmund Freud, "Über Coca," in S. E. *Cocaine Papers*, 47–73.

⁵³ See *ibid.*, 50.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

Carl Koller, who first introduced cocaine as a local anesthetic into ophthalmology, specifically for surgery of the cornea,⁵⁵ wrote about Freud's respective contribution by virtue of his article "Über Coca": "Cocaine was brought to the foreground of discussion for us Viennese by the thorough compilation and interesting therapeutic paper of my colleague at the General Hospital, Dr. Sigmund Freud."⁵⁶ While this was a breakthrough, Freud, in the exploratory fervor of his late twenties, also ventured into an experiment that was less successful than Koller's achievement in practical medicine. He attempted, with the help of cocaine but making the serious mistake of intravenous injection, to cure Dr Ernst von Fleischl-Marxow of his morphine addiction, thus sidestepping his own advice of moderate use. The project ended in a disaster.⁵⁷ After 1887, and under heavy attack from several members of the medical establishment, Freud retreated from championing cocaine,⁵⁸ although he continued to consume the substance himself until 1895.⁵⁹ The father of psychoanalysis, to recall the counterpoint, would develop the habit of cigar smoking which, in contrast, accompanied him during his lifetime and which, according to Louis Menand, he even analyzed as a substitute for another "addiction," masturbation.⁶⁰

This story is telling in several regards. What emerges is the question of psychoactive⁶¹ relationship to psychoanalysis and psychopathology. Irrespective of Freud's embarrassment about his partial misjudgments, into sight comes a historico-conceptual conjuncture in which areas such as medicalization, psychology, psychiatry, and culture intertwine. The decades following Freud's cocaine writings constitute an epoch, during which the "discontents of civilization" amply resonate or, to say it graphically, the centers of urban and industrial progress start to be drowned by the "dreamworlds" of commodities and advertisements, and by the *energies* that circulate adversely between the promises of gratification stemming from mass culture and consumption, on the one hand, and the neurotic pressure of the "reality principle," on the other. If this was a world in which "the hungry psyche was replacing the hungry belly,"⁶² the imminent yet tricky closeness of transgression and repression had moved to the center of modern life. And not incidentally, the psychoactive "counterrevolution" regarding some narcotics (like cocaine and the opiates), unlike others (such as nicotine and alcohol) was launched during the first decades of the twentieth century. This coincides, interestingly, with Freud's mature reflections on culture and society, in which he had lost intellectual interest in the stimulant and had turned to culture as neurosis, arguing in *Civilization and its Discontents* that modern Western life had become compulsively marked by symptoms of repression. Here the question arises of the extent to which Freud's eventual exclusion of the psychoactive stimulant cocaine from his psychoanalytic concerns might have become a "symptom" itself.

⁵⁵ Carl Koller, cited reference in Robert Kennedy, *Coca Exotica*, 133, note 32.

⁵⁶ Carl Koller, cited in *ibid.*, 72; also compare Cynthia Kuhn et al., *Buzzed*, 213.

⁵⁷ Regarding Freud's self-critical stance, see Joseph Kennedy, 79 (also compare 68, 76–9).

⁵⁸ See Sigmund Freud, "The Dream of Irma's Injection." In S. F. *Cocaine Papers*, 205; also compare the 1987 paper, "Craving for and Fear of Cocaine." *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ See *ibid.*, 121; see Joseph Kennedy, 78.

⁶⁰ See Menand, Louis, "Introduction" to Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 10.

⁶¹ Robert Arthey, cited in David Courtwright, *Forces of Habit*, 4.

One might be skeptical of Freud's prioritizing repression, since the problem that transgression cannot simply be "replaced" suggests a threshold, upon which different effects are played out. These scenarios that are ingrained in conflict connect, in one way or another, with the modern dynamics and institutions by which the individual subject is formed and administered. What do psychoactive substances and neurosis have in common? Can they be perceived as contrasting phenomena in the negotiation of affective states as well as hegemonies at the turn of the twentieth century? Is not the market-driven, individual and collective, geo-economically fueled, pharmacological stimulation and regulation of affect the actual modern invention, one that bears on peoples' unconscious strata while placing the problem somewhere other than in the individual psyche whose traumatic core Freud had extrapolated onto society? Does not modernity's drive to take hold of an uneven world consist, as well, more of the proactive management of affects and embodied imagination, including transgressions, than of Freudian repression and sublimation?

Here, "dissociation" becomes a necessary term, seemingly found in an in-between located somewhere "underneath" transgression, and "above" repression. This concept will help us draw a further contra-punctual constellation. Dissociation signals a contradiction between cognitive insights and behavioral practice, prompted by the question: "How do we manage to accept, and act in accordance with, *error that we know to be error*?"⁶² This does not primarily refer to the use of drugs but has to do, rather, with the human mind's proclivity for "illusion" and really "distortion," which are not viewed as simply insane, but as forms of "active ignorance." John F. Schumaker describes it as a "complex mental operation" whose implication is twofold. First, "the brain can *disengage* itself in such a way that information will be processed in contravention of its own capacity for accurate higher order information processing" (*ibid.*). Secondly, what emerges, in a perceptual-psychological nexus, is a set of "false alternatives that serve as functional surrogates to the rejected portions of reality" (*ibid.*).⁶³

The argument, to be laid out in the following pages, will touch upon the nexus between dissociation and consumerism. However, and this is the difference we intend to make, certain "narcotics" are imagined as possible differentials that can help foster an epistemological critique, as well. That is to say, far from equating the consumption of narcotics with an all-out dissociation from oppressive or "normative" realities, and not simply identifying consumerism with dissociation, the question should instead be: what are some of the intricate relationships that exist between an exchange-value oriented contemporary matrix (consumption for the sake of consumption, that is, capital maximization) and dissociative potentials, and practices that abound under late modern circumstances? We want to further elaborate on the counterpoint between cocaine and nicotine, the first being declared illegal after 1914, whereas the second kept enjoying its ironic triumph well across the twentieth century ("smoking can cause death"). At issue is, in effect, the varying counterpoint that these two narcotics conform in relationship to the dissonant concert of market economies, repeatedly adjusted geo- and biopolitically: the geopolitics of cocaine is different from the geopolitics of tobacco, as are the respective biopolitical strategies.⁶⁴

⁶² Robert Schumaker, *The Corruption of Reality*, 36.

⁶³ Regarding dissociation theory, see *ibid.*, 40–53; regarding the aspect of memory, see 51.

Let us consider David Lonsons *On Drugs* as one of the studies that seriously engages the "dialectics" of first-order pharmacological effects and second-order dimensions of narcotics. Here one learns that dissociation, understood as "active ignorance" or better, purposeful "distortion" of the higher-order, cognitive and verbal state of intelligence can be a highly aporetic phenomenon. To start with "Don Tabaco" (Ortiz), nicotine is a drug that does not distort cognition, it does not "alter consciousness," so to speak. It rather seems to stipulate thinking and serve the concentration process. Simultaneously, smoking implies disregard for one's own health and sometimes the health of others. Jonathan Franzen narrates it this way:

Because I'm capable of hating almost every attribute of cigarettes (let's not even talk about cigars), and because I smoked what I believed was my last cigarette five years ago and have never owned an ashtray, it's easy for me to think of myself as nicotine-free. But if the man who bears my name is not a smoker, then why is there again a box fan for exhaust purposes in his living-room window? Why, at the end of every workday, is there a small collection of cigarette butts in the saucer on the table by this fan?⁶⁵

Smoking cigarettes "is a kind of template addiction," and nicotine can be imagined as a "chameleon willing to play any drug role that the user casts it in."⁶⁶

The sector of intellect that nicotine stimulates is the one that thrives on the "pleasure of thinking" rather than on ethics. Nicotine has some effects on the appetites, mildly suppressing food hunger but not affecting sexual drive. The temporal "cigarette after sex" and "cigarette after the meal" suggests that nicotine's principal impact on desire is to create the desire for more of itself, so that any interruption of that reflexive appetite, even for food or sex, has to be marked by a ceremonial return to it.⁶⁷

One might want to slightly reformulate this: what places smoking at a special interface of ceremony and "bio-chemistry" is the sublime suspense that it can help generate, suspense of an activity in the way of completion, or reflexive breaking up, together with a peculiar sensation that makes the suspense itself pleasurable—with nicotine's working on the neurotransmitter acetylcholine.⁶⁸ This ceremonial act is seemingly so gratifying, so stunningly "self-serving," that most smokers display a down-to-earth indifference toward the disgust and damage that they often cause to nearby nonsmokers. What surprises us about smokers is not the dissociative act as such, but the utter normalcy with which it is performed, and that smoking is so addictive "that it is often said to be harder to give up than heroin."⁶⁹ On top of things, some studies discuss the possibility that nicotine enhances, together with mental alertness, memory function.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ See Paul Gootenberg, *Andean Cocaine: Luis Astorga, El siglo de las drogas: Usos, percepciones y personajes*, for tobacco, see Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint*, and Richard Klinger, *Ashes to Ashes*.

⁶⁵ Jonathan Franzen, op. cit., 144. For a suggestive, as well as ironic anecdote referring to a Cold-War perception of "living in Berlin," see ibid., 147–8.

⁶⁶ David Lenson, *On Drugs*, 37, note 5.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 37.

Regarding the interference of smoking with the daily rhythm of arousal and satiation of desire, Lenson formulates:

The fundamental change that nicotine effects is a fragmentation of the wave motion of time (*chronos*) into discrete particles (*kairos*). Cigarettes become the commas of daily life, dividing otherwise uninterrupted waves of experience into punctuated intervals or separate temporal units (note 6). . . . An active smoker's cognitive activity is completely divided into quanta. (37)

It should be added that this "interception" of time experience does not equal a dispersion, or fragmentation, of energies but the creation of a momentum that realigns body and consciousness in a peculiar act of surrender. It also reduces anxiety, unless overdoses result in nicotine poisoning. In that regard, "*kairos*" is energy condensed into a momentum of both awareness and alertness, enabled by the medium of "holy smoke." This explains why smoking can temporally "alleviate" even the most alienating labor practices and routine activities, by providing self-administered adjustments between autonomic activity (the nervous system) and life's external affairs.⁷¹

On a related topic, cigarettes are among the most profitable commodities; however, among compulsive smokers, they become unconsciously fetishized to an extent that the daily waste of money turns negligible. The modern cigarette smoker metamorphoses into a Benjaminian allegory at the verge of commodity fetishism. Cigarettes, as "hybrids" that have been turned commodities par excellence, virtually produce the smoking creature. They provide the medium that is power—the widely available, tasty matter of smoke that is animated and absorbed by the life-giving human breath.⁷² Here we have a "creature," whose proclivity to *Baroque aesthetics* speaks from the transgression of the body's "normal" state which, while tending to self-destruction, is perceived as both pleasurable and unavoidable. In the vision of Fernando Ortiz,

"There is always a mysterious, sacral quality about tobacco. Tobacco is for mature people who are responsible to society and to the gods. The first smoke, even when it is behind one's parents' backs, is in the nature of a *rite de passage*, the tribal rite of initiation into the civic responsibilities of manhood, the test of fortitude and control against the bitterness of life, its burning temptations, and the vapors of its dreams."⁷³

The masculine symbolism is vividly played out by Ortiz; therefore, a free association of Walter Benjamin's "Baroque drama" would point to the other extreme of manhood rites—the downfall of the male "sovereign," his becoming creaturely-like.⁷⁴ Apart from (cigars' offering) a "corporeal" attribute of individual power, whose excessive use can lead to monstrous destruction, the nonreligious, compulsive smoking of our age is constitutively ambivalent. It is as though the smoker would offer himself, or herself, to a divinity that no longer exists in the "tangible" fantasies of the world, yet lingers

⁶⁸ See Cynthia Kuhn et al., *Buzzed*, 166.

⁶⁹ David Lenson, 37.

⁷⁰ See ibid., 167.

⁷¹ Also compare Helene Keane, "Smoking, Addiction, and the Making of Time," 119–33.

invisibly behind the figurations of smoke. Money, modernity's ever-present fetish, is generally spent to fulfill needs and to reproduce desires—their fulfillment withholds itself by their displacement from one commodity to the next. Cigarettes, however, bring the smoker closer to a gratifying sensation, where pleasure is perceived as “real,” although the fulfillment of a desire proper is not at stake. This is why the smoker can waste money in full yet dissociated awareness of his or her dependency on the “magic” product of cigarettes. This magic, however, is decisively due to nicotine’s going from lungs to heart to brain in one rush.⁷⁵

With cocaine, things are different. Lenson, whose proviso above is linked to both pharmacological inquiry and philosophical reflection, believes that pleasure, unlike desire, “does not appropriate. Its existence is based upon a provisional escape from economics, whereas desire in Consumerism is the economic drive wheel and the engine of consciousness” (Lenson, 72). Pleasure can come from friendship and conversation, generosity, intellectual work, engagement with nature and crafts, “or any number of objects that do not need to be purchased” (ibid.). The stigmatization of marijuana in America,⁷⁶ the author adds, is based on this aspect of its potential: “it enables the user to take pleasure from ordinary objects already within the range of perception” (ibid.). To use a different wording, it enables users to sidestep *exchange value* by indulging, for example, in the “value” of the senses, the imagination, the environment. The nonutilitarian search for pleasure and a “profane yet illuminated” approach to pleasure have already been found at the core of Benjamin’s writings *On Hashish*, especially “Myslovice—Braunschweig—Marselles” (1930) and “Hashish in Marselles” (1932); both hashish and marijuana derive from the cannabis plant. These texts, together with twelve protocols of drug experiments, were written at the time when the legal restriction of cannabis was set on its course. Pleasure that “does not appropriate” shines from Benjamin’s remarkable passage, where the image of the “coin” is set against the idea of money, making guilt (and debt) pervasive.⁷⁷ What matters in these words, more than love itself, is the pleasure of feeling illuminated about love’s actual secret:

And when I recall this state, I would like to believe that hashish persuades Nature to permit us—for less egoistic purposes—that squandering of our own existence that we know in love. For if, when we love, our existence runs through Nature’s fingers like golden coins that she cannot hold and lets fall so that they can thus purchase new birth, she now throws us, without hoping or expecting anything, in ample handfuls toward existence.⁷⁸

Should it be conceivable that there are drugs that must be combated, even through war, for these very reasons? Lenson makes precisely this point: “Consumerism’s tacit metaphysics” (72) must be upheld against the odds, which brings us back to the case of cocaine. Cocaine is only allegedly about pleasure.

⁷² See Andrew Weil on inhalation, *The Natural Mind*, 113, and 104.

⁷³ Renato Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint*, 14.

⁷⁴ See Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 91.

⁷⁵ See Andrew Weil, *The Natural Mind*, 113.

Cocaine promises the greatest pleasure ever known in just a minute more, if the right image is presented to the eyes, if another dose is administered, if a sexual interaction is orchestrated in just the right way. But that future never comes. There is a physical pleasure to the drug, to be sure, but it is incidental, trivial, compared to what is always just about to happen. . . . A sensation driven out of the present into the past or the future cannot be pleasurable. (71)

Another way of describing the studied phenomenon is to say that cocaine can render “desire” reflexive. It can do so by mimicking a world of accelerated desire, and even “consumer consciousness” while, paradoxically, “a person using a great deal of cocaine is likely to buy little else but the drug” (72). Following on this argument that touches upon dimensions from which consumers tend to be dissuaded, we read that cocaine is a “drug that diverts desire from the conventional appetite for consuming objects” and thus “mimics ordinary capitalist appropriation” (ibid.). That is to say it can cannibalize utilitarian appropriation by generating a spiral of accelerated desire and turning it away from the fetish of commodities—a surprising insight, in the event that the mechanism is effective. “Cocaine capitalism is to conventional capitalism as cancerous cell growth is to normal cell growth in the body . . . Cocaine must be combated on a war footing for precisely this reason” (ibid.).

The described potential makes cocaine, a “drug of desire,” different from the drugs of pleasure, such as marijuana and others. Interestingly, in common discourse, cocaine is confounded with drugs of pleasure.

The traditional aversion to “unproductive” pleasure may be harnessed in this way without requiring an attack on greed and desire, the forces that motivate both the conventional and the cocaine markets. If cocaine is portrayed as a drug of unproductive pleasure rather than a savage mimicry of consumer consciousness, Consumerism can attack it without attacking itself at the same time. (ibid., 72–3)

Keeping dissociation in mind, and provided that the placebo factor is taken into account, this would imply that cocaine could enable one of the most active forms of dissociative behavior imaginable: a distancing from that must-have state of affairs, the one that consists in the curative day-to-day purchase in the happiness spots where today’s most ubiquitous *pharmaka* are displayed—commodities⁷⁹ or, respectively, the daily indulgence in market society’s iconic altar—the television screen. Moreover, the “reflexivity” that such a psychoactive substance and practice potentially allow could open a pathway to the kind of heterodox consciousness that Benjamin was discussing in relationship to the project of the Paris Surrealists: winning the forces of intoxication for the purposes of critical illumination and ethical politics.⁸⁰ For Benjamin and the Surrealists, hashish and opium, as drugs of pleasure, were the objects of somatic and intellectual experimentation. Cocaine, had it been available, might have signaled a still more rigorous apprehension of “profane illumination,” than the one that the German critic proposed in his Surrealism essay. We will discuss this intellectual project further in the next chapter.

⁷⁹ See Cynthia Kuhn et al., *Buzzed*, 157–8.

⁸⁰ See Walter Benjamin, “Capitalism as Religion.”

Conceptual search and contrasting commonly held truths motivate our reflection, not the systematic study of psychoactive substances. Nicotine and cocaine, two of modernity's ominous and desired psychoactives, have been placed in a relationship that can provide insights into the varying roles of narcotic substances and the nonhomogeneous character of culture-biology interfaces. From there, the "counterpoint" helps by providing a closer look at one of the harshest paradoxes: the meanings of both desire and denial as they traverse the twentieth-century's "cult of pharmacology" and its prohibitive mentality. Finally, our point was to show that the *pharmakon* had not only migrated from Greek mythology and philosophy into the post-Christian era, but it had actually fueled, in a new shape, psychotropic Western modernity. This was due to its blossoming as a "magic" device, spread out into ever larger assortments of "holy" substances, chemically "improved," aggressively marketed, and eventually restricted at the threshold between industrial capitalism and advanced globalization. This was also a moment at which secularization, its crises, and the psychopathology of the modern individual had started to generate more addictions than the rational mask of sanity could handle.

Our initial counterpoint embraced not cigarettes and cocaine, but the unadulterated, ecological tobacco and coca cultigens of native American domestication. Therefore it should be remembered, once again, that tobacco is different from cigarettes and, above all, coca leaves should not be confused with cocaine. In Andrew Weil's words, "it is good to learn to prefer natural drugs to synthetic or refined ones. . . . Moreover, it is wise to introduce drugs into the body in natural ways. . . . Indians who chew the whole [coca] leaves do not experience toxicity and generally do not become dependent."⁸¹ As the study of drug plant-related pathways to health and affective sanity, as well as socio-existential sustainability, takes its course against the odds, there is a chance that the millenarian Andean leaf will join and genuinely energize a nonviolent understanding of sobriety. However, chewing a handful of coca leaves in New York or Berlin, in ways similar to those that accompany people's sipping their daily coffee, would be a new sign of global tolerance and justice, both morally and economically.

Unlearning fear, absolving the ghost of the "Pharmakos": An open genealogy

The "pharmakon" is not an absolute value, neither evil nor heavenly, which has been of foremost interest to writers whose respective gallery becomes larger, the more attentively one looks. Here are some of the best-known names—Thomas de Quincey, Charles Baudelaire, Gustave Flaubert, Marcel Proust, Hermann Hesse, Aldous Huxley, Antonin Artaud, Ernst Junger, Anaïs Nin, William Burroughs. Did intoxication not become a privileged sphere beginning in the eighteenth century, one which literature and art could turn into a medium to be used against a plain culture of affairs associated with the ego-self and an impoverishing life-world increasingly depleted

⁸⁰ Walter Benjamin, "Trauerspiel in Marcellus," In W. B. *On Trauerspiel*, 126.

of sensual capability and synaesthetic "insight," spiritual energy and kinesthetic / physiological "consciousness" but loaded, in turn, with fears, egomania and all manner of tendentious judgments. If human psychis and biological existence had drifted apart, were these writers not obsessed with discovering the secret of their relating narratives? This theme has incited, over the past decades, a corpus of critical works on both sides of the Atlantic, works whose authors have begun to problematize those notions of literature which deemed themselves to be above the psychotropic challenge. However, the present study does not head in this direction. The segment of Latin American literatures that will provide our field of investigation ranks "after" modern intellectuals' fascination with narcotics and their potential to provide access to the diversity of consciousness. There is a dialectic axis that makes these literatures on the one hand peripheral and to an extent, marginal, but propels them, on the other, to a realm of experience and reflexivity which is more "advanced" than in the case of their Western European and North American antecessors. The chief difference is the way literary modernity's involvement with narcotic substances and experiences situates itself, historically and culturally, "before" the war on drugs. Latin American *narcoepics*, in turn, excel as narrative and ethical formations whose major theme is the heterogeneity of territories and life worlds which the war on drugs has violently affected. The vote of narcotics is not necessarily to address this war directly, nor do they simply attain to the symbolism of social critique. These epics accommodate multiple imaginaries around a peculiar interface, one that we will define in the next chapter as the "dialectics of intoxication." It is the difference between the modern literary and artistic interest in "ecstasy" and a new narratological and certainly paradoxical interest in "sobriety," which requires that we introduce yet another concept. Whereas the "hero" of the West's narcotic literature is the "pharmakon," similar to Fernando Ortiz's *Don Tabaco* and *Dona Azúcar*, the protagonist in narcoepics is the "pharmakos" (in its metamorphic, as well as self-reflexive figurations).

The concept of the *pharmakos* is genealogically related to that of the *pharmakon*, yet this genealogy has become submerged. In the twilight zones of contemporary disseminations of affective power and stigmatization, such as the distribution of fear and guilt, as well as in the different realms of literature where the unspeaken and absent are called into "presence," the *pharmakos* is rising to new relevance. Discovering the hinge between the proliferation of "pharmaka" for the sake of rising modernity and "psychoactive repression," taking hold in the shadows of modernity's exhaustion,⁸² presents one area of concern. The second realm awaiting elucidation requires that we shift attention, not away from psychoactive substances and factors, but toward a peculiar mode, by which otherness is constructed or refashioned. This is concerned with, as well, the status of people and communities, or their images, which are publicly related to indecent, or abject, or straightforwardly illegal practices regarding narcotics. But who actually is the *pharmakos*?

To find the footprints of the *pharmakos*, one must scrutinize literary and philosophical imagination, together with the works of mythology. Traditionally, the

⁸² See Bernard Sieglar, *Von der Biopolitik zur Psychomachie*, 52.