

REOPENING THE DOORS OF PERCEPTION:
An Examination of Cannabis, Fear, and Altered States of Consciousness

by

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Certificate of approval

This is to certify that the accompanying thesis by Carolyn Kristine Erving has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in Environmental Humanities.

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*“If the doors of perception were cleansed
every thing would appear to man as it is, in-
finite.*

*For man has closed himself up, till he sees
all things thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern.”*

– William Blake

I. The Question

“So do you think it’s good or bad?” my friend’s father asked me during a cloudy Sunday morning. Like most of the conversations I have been having recently, the question of my thesis came up. Whenever I mention that I am writing about cannabis and altered states of consciousness, it is as if there is a glitch in how my speech is translated to my inquisitor’s ear. The focus lands on “altered states of consciousness” and it is as if cannabis does not exist or is a word from some lost, foreign language.

Today, however, the conversation had focused for a short time on altered states of consciousness before landing flatly on the topic of cannabis. *Is it good or bad?* I repeated the question to myself while attempting to formulate an answer that would not shut down conversation or somehow offend this man’s curiosity, as so often happens when discussing pot.

Yet I already seemed to say something to offend his wife, who sat next to him on the couch. When I mentioned “cannabis,” her pout immediately flattened into a sharp line and her eyes fixated on the table in front of her shoes. She clearly did not want to be engaged in conversation nor for her husband to be pursuing the topic further. I could almost feel the judgment radiating towards me as she began to make the connections: my daughter’s friend is a stoner.

This assumption may seem ungrounded—after all, my friend’s mom was only sitting on the couch with a flat smile and did not say anything to directly convey judgment. But throughout this writing process, I have found that judgment often comes in the form of disengagement: the uncomfortable, taboo-ridden silence of someone who wishes to create distance from the topic.

“So, are you a stoner?” Usually, this is the first question that I am asked by my peers. I am writing about pot, so I must smoke a lot of it, right? But whether that is or is not the case is beside the point. I have learned that at the heart of that question lies the same judgment that led my friend’s mom to disengage. When a taboo is brought up, there is an urgent need to associate it with someone or something outside of ourselves—to create distance so that it couldn’t possibly become associated with us. I cannot just explore the subject of a taboo like another subject—I must become associated with it in some way that pertains to my character and identity. If I am writing about cannabis and consider myself to be a stoner, then it “makes sense”—only a stoner would write about cannabis.

Marijuana, pot, hashish, cannabis, weed. No matter the name, the substance is deeply controversial in U.S. society. The fragrant, moss-colored plant silences conversation and conjures up images of vagrant minorities and untamed adolescents. Yet the drug is also finding gradual acceptance among some citizens within specific societal pockets. This swell of acceptance has become so fierce that the substance has even gained full political legalization in some states, and questions have begun to arise pertaining to federal legalization. Yet the taboo of cannabis is just as consuming as the smoke that the plant emits as it wraps its encumbered tendrils around the judgments of

even the most liberal users. So long as cannabis remains as socially and politically verboten as it is today, it will not have a chance of becoming accepted by the majority of society.

The question that was asked of me on that cloudy morning was much more than a question asking me to make a value judgment: “So do you think it’s good or bad?” If I answer “good,” I automatically align myself with the drug and become a pot-head. If I answer “bad,” I can appear as a wholesome student and the topic can be dismissed without much discussion. However, I see it as this: someone who asks for a simple value judgment on a complex topic is probably not looking for a complex answer and has most likely already formulated a personal opinion. The value-based question misses the point by attempting to create a black-and-white situation out of a grey topic, and the topic of cannabis falls into a category that is very grey indeed. I made an attempt to answer the man’s question, pointing out that it was neither “good” nor “bad,” and that my goal in writing was not to formulate a judgment or value analysis of the substance. I continued, noting that I wished instead to understand the riddle of why cannabis does not fit within our culture and accepted dogmas, yet is still accepted by a growing number of people. Why is alcohol socially sanctioned while cannabis is not? Why is it okay for medical, but not recreational, users to utilize cannabis? And how is it that a seemingly innocuous plant can hold so much political weight and have the ability to shut down so many conversations? I finished by conveying that I wished to understand what it is about the specific nature of the cannabis high that is so forbidding to so many people.

All of these questions are exactly what I hope to focus and expand upon in this essay that you hold in your hands. However, I must emphasize that it is not my aim to

resolve these taboos nor to make a final judgment. Rather, I wish to use the taboo to more clearly understand the cannabis high's alteration of the mind. Many of the stigmas associated with cannabis rest on the surface of a deeper rejection of the herb. These stigmas have led to severe policies against the use of cannabis and have formed a widespread rhetoric of hostility that bars the drug from becoming socially acceptable. However, it is my argument that the aggressive rejection of cannabis actually stems from its threat to the centuries-old construction of the western mind. I will first explore the various political and racial dialogues that often arise from a preliminary discussion of the substance. Then, I will move on to the cannabis high's specific mind-altering capabilities and how the drug compares to the socially and politically accepted alcohol high. Finally, I will argue that cannabis threatens the core of our dominant cultural episteme of uber-rationality. The cannabis high presents an epistemological challenge through its tendency of de-centering our rational and egocentric intellect, or the undivided paramount self.

II. Contemporary Views of Cannabis

“Don’t ask questions in a society that thinks it has all of the answers.”

–Anonymous

Cannabis has been used for centuries by various cultures around the world, but only in the past two centuries has the plant become heavily contested in U.S. culture and politics. Cannabis falls into a unique category, as the plant has managed to cross the boundary between medical and recreational in a way that other psychotropic drugs have not yet experienced. Through racial stigmas, political controversy, and even within the actual experienced high, cannabis resides at the forefront of cultural and scientific discussions. While the drug has yet to be legalized on a national level, it has been legalized medically in twenty states and recreationally in Washington, D.C.; Alaska; Oregon; Washington; and Colorado.ⁱ

The commentary surrounding cannabis in the United States places the substance in a liminal space between fear and acceptance. While psychotropic substances such as LSD, MDMA, and psilocybin are usually first mentioned in the discussion of psychedelics, cannabis also holds psychedelic properties. Unlike many hallucinogens, such as LSD and MDMA, cannabis does not need to be synthesized in a laboratory, which means that it is naturally derived. While psilocybin is also naturally derived by way of the mushroom species, it has not generated the same degree of conversation and

public debate as cannabis. Hallucinogens such as LSD, MDMA, psilocybin, and cannabis are beginning to find recognition within the medical field, but only cannabis has moved into the realm of medical, and now, recreational legalization.

While cannabis is increasing in use and is becoming legal in more states, it carries with it a lengthy list of taboos that barricade it from becoming nationally approved and unanimously accepted by society. Socially conservative factions of the United States, in particular, have adopted a dogma of terror when it comes to marijuana. While socially sanctioned methods of “getting high” exist, namely through the consumption of alcohol, cannabis has yet to become federally decriminalized.

Drug studies, and specifically the study of cannabis, help to elucidate current U.S. political and racial debates surrounding notions of societal and individual freedoms. When cannabis is viewed in relation to the way that certain aspects of U.S. political and racial debates have questioned and placed restraints on altered states of consciousness, we are able to delve into a deeper exploration of how the lived experience of the cannabis-altered state of consciousness comes into conflict with societal conceptions of freedom and control. Specifically, we can begin to ask questions such as: Why is “getting high,” specifically through the consumption of cannabis, so problematic and terrifying for much of the U.S. population? And, what is it about the specific nature of the marijuana high that is so foreboding to culturally conservative factions of U.S. society?

...

In order to begin to understand the conflicts created and elucidated by cannabis, it is first necessary to understand the notion of “getting high.” Often associated today with adolescent drug use and 1960s counter-culture literature, the term “getting high” has reverberated throughout the 20th century. While the term is most associated with drug culture, it becomes quite nebulous when viewed through its literal symbolism. A simplistic reading of the term allows us to grasp a basic denotation of upward momentum. While “high” gives the term directionality, “getting” adds momentum. To “get high” is to attain or reach a certain point that is specifically directed upwards. Thus, the term can refer to more than drug use.

To “get high” is to achieve a heightened awareness—that is, to experience an acute level of consciousness. Heightened awareness is somehow beyond our usual horizon of vision and understanding. When placed in light of religions such as Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, “getting high” describes transcendence. In these religions, shrines to heavenly beings are oftentimes placed above the worshiper, physically orienting the spiritual practice in an upward direction. The word “transcendence” is inherent to worship within Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, and is also necessary in understanding the notion of “getting high.”

Rooted in the Latin *trans* (across) and *scandere* (climb), to transcend means to literally “climb across.”ⁱⁱ In religions such as Christianity, transcendence lends itself to practitioners as a way to climb across the moral pitfalls of the mind and as a way to become closer with God and heavenly ideals. However, transcendental states of mind can also exist outside of deity and religion and can be accessed through certain states of mind. One can transcend ignorance through education or upbringing through distancing from

family. Transcending allows us to enter into a world that is more complex than our usual reality. To transcend is a distancing by way of growing from, and subsequently growing out of, an existing mindset.

In order to achieve an altered state of consciousness, or to “get high,” many people throughout history have turned to psychotropic, or mind-altering, substances. A psychotropic drug is any chemical substance that interferes with the usual operation of the brain. Specifically, psychotropic drugs alter the quality of our conscious experience.ⁱⁱⁱ In today’s pharmaceutical industry, psychotropic drugs are most often perceived as substances that affect the mood and act as sedatives or tranquilizers.^{iv} Thus, medically speaking, psychotropic drugs are commonly thought to include various anti-anxiety and anti-depressant medications. However, as the general definition suggests, there are many more mind-altering substances that fall into the category of “psychotropic.”

Psychotropic, and specifically psychedelic, substances are often deemed superfluous and criminal unless justified under the aegis of medical purposes, but it is important to note the role that such substances had in early cultures and religions around the world. Psychedelics form a subclass of psychotropic drugs and are defined as substances that have the ability to produce hallucinations and an expansion of consciousness. Psychedelics provide a mode of “getting high” by allowing the mind to transcend its usual consciousness or reality. From the use of peyote by indigenous populations of the Southwest to the use of ayahuasca by native populations of South America, psychotropic drugs, and especially plant-derived psychedelic substances, have a prominent and long history among early human populations.

The importance of psychotropic, and specifically psychedelic, substances is so immense that multiple scholars have suggested that psychotropic substances may have had a role in forming the first human religions. Because a sizeable number of plants contain hallucinogenic compounds, “It is inevitable that ancient hunter/gatherers would have sampled these [hallucinogenic plants].”^v While some note that human interactions with psychotropic substances might have had little impact on the formation of certain early cultures and religions, it is hard to believe that the disorienting effects of certain plants did not cause some form of larger reaction that “may well have encouraged [ancient peoples] to believe in powerful spirits that controlled their lives and the world in general.”^{vi} There is a wide literature on the theories connecting psychotropic, and specifically hallucinogenic, drugs with the formation of early religions; however, I would like to propose that whether or not these theories are valid is unimportant for the time being. Instead, I bring up this literature to emphasize that the use of psychotropic drugs was discovered and put to use by many human beings throughout the course of history and prehistory.

Despite prohibitive measures set in place by taboos and legislation, today our everyday lives are riddled with the use of psychotropic drugs. From corner coffee shops to local bars, various substances are readily available for those who seek to alter the mind and mood. And now, depending on which state one lives in within the U.S., it is possible to visit a recreational marijuana dispensary to alter one’s mind through cannabis. It is hard to picture certain psychotropic drugs, such as caffeine, as being capable of altering our realities yet any alteration of brain chemistry results in a different way of perceiving reality and of experiencing consciousness, however benign the high might be. Thus,

while drinking coffee or energy drinks may seem commonplace and outside the scope of creating an altered experience of reality, the symptoms of heightened efficiency and lucidity actually constitute as perceived alterations in consciousness.

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Consciousness can be viewed as a doorway to perceiving—a method of assessing what exists in one’s reality. However, our consciousness is limited to a certain degree of reality and, as Richard Miller states in *Drugged*, “Like the prisoners in Plato’s cave, our normal experiences may only represent the shadows of a greater reality.”^{vii} Just like the freed prisoner from Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave*, who escapes into the light only to continue to look at the shadows, our minds are accustomed to accepting a shadowed and fragmented reality that is within our scope of understanding. I argue that while people cannot readily know what greater reality exists beyond our scope of consciousness, we can broaden our understanding through the use of psychotropic, and especially psychedelic, drugs if we so choose.

Biochemistry has allowed us to understand far more about psychotropic drugs than ever previously thought imaginable, but there are few disciplines or modes of understanding that allow us to conceptualize the felt experience—the change in consciousness, rather than chemistry, that occurs under the influence of a psychotropic drug. Psychedelics enable us to return to an earlier, and forgotten, version of our human selves. However, this return engenders an epistemological terror because it is in direct

opposition to the age-old dictums of rationality and the supremacy of human rationality that we abide by reflexively.

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Despite its current prohibition in much of the U.S., cannabis has been used for thousands of years by numerous cultures around the world. The term “weed,” often used to describe cannabis, is apt when discussing the growing patterns and biology of the plant. Mitch Earleywine describes the astounding characteristics of cannabis in his book *Understanding Cannabis*:

The plant grows quickly in many environments and can reach a height of 20 feet. Few natural pests attack the crop; few extremes in weather challenge its growth [...] The stalks help produce fiber; the seeds provide food and oil. The flowers, leaves, and resin appear in medical and intoxicating preparations.^{viii}

While I would like to focus on the psychotropic uses of the plant, it is necessary to note that humans utilize almost every part of the plant, which illustrates the importance and potential for further use of cannabis outside of psychotropy.

Dozens of cultures around the world have experimented with cannabis-originated highs since antiquity, yet marijuana still remains illicit in much of the U.S. Cannabis has been legalized recreationally and medically in several states, yet it still remains criminalized at a federal and, arguably, symbolic level. While several states have recreationally legalized cannabis, many more have medically legalized the substance. It is puzzling that so many states have only been able to partially, but not fully, legalize marijuana. Why is it more acceptable for cannabis to be consumed by some people—medical patients—than others? Even as a medicine, cannabis carries with it a heavy connotation—after all, it’s not “real medicine” right?

Why is cannabis *more* acceptable as a medicine than as a substance solely for the sake of pleasure? First, consider the term “recreational,” which denotes pursuing an activity for the sake of pleasure or entertainment. The term is also weighed down with connotations that disassociate it from work or measurable outputs. “Medical marijuana,” on the other hand, falls into the realm of acceptable productivity because of the association of “medical” with pharmaceuticals and healing. Thus, while it is somewhat constructive to consume cannabis for an ailment, it is viewed as unproductive to engage with it for enjoyment, hinting at the symbolic weight *Cannabis sativa* carries with it.

The symbolic meaning of cannabis affects both users and non-users through laden stigmas that lead to restrictive legislation. As John Kaplan notes in his book *Marijuana: The New Prohibition*, “Today a great part of the objection to marijuana use is not based upon any effect of the drug, but rather upon the entire life-style that many associate with it.”^{xix} Cannabis users, and especially recreational users, are often associated with a lack of productivity. For instance, the couch stoner, a trope in many popular films and television shows is associated with a lessened intelligence and acquisition of wealth. While the associations with a stigmatized “cannabis lifestyle” are also deeply rooted in race and political status, wealth cannot be overlooked in relation to the cannabis user. Within the capitalist society, wealth is traditionally seen as a marker of productivity and resulting success. Kaplan also addresses the conflict between cannabis and progress when he writes, “It is hardly surprising [...] that many people will wish strongly that the criminalization of marijuana be retained if only as a reminder to marijuana-users—and indeed to many who do not use marijuana but who are like users in other ways—that this life-style and these values are less worthy.”^x Cannabis, particularly when used

recreationally, poses a conflict to U.S. notions of purity and progress and its illegal use is severely enforced at a federal level.

III. Public Enemy Number One

“Marijuana policy has never been driven by science in this country.”

– Clay Dillow

According to a 2015 Gallup poll, 44 percent of U.S. adults have tried cannabis—up from 38 percent in 2013.^{xi} While this statistic does not account for adults who are considered to be regular users, it does show that a sizeable portion of the U.S. adult population has been exposed first-hand to cannabis use. John Kaplan addresses this when he writes, “[T]here are a number of indications that, considering the seriousness of the crime, marijuana use is amazingly widespread.”^{xii} From this, we can begin to see that cannabis use, although culturally and politically forbidden, is prevalent—and increasing over time. There is something about the substance that cannot be ignored, as it has led nearly half of the U.S. population to try it despite restrictive taboos and laws.

In the eyes of the law and many societal factions, the potential enhancements associated with cannabis use are pushed to the side and the substance is cast as a dangerous intoxicant that leads to negative forms of impairment. The impairment associated with cannabis is opposed to the impairments of other psychotropic substances, such as alcohol, that are glorified in almost all forms of popular culture. The legal ramifications for producing and consuming cannabis are stringent, especially within states that have not legalized it medically or recreationally. There are also rigid guidelines

for how cannabis can be sold and consumed in states that have legalized it. Despite a cultural undercurrent, which shows that many people are curious about the positive attributes of cannabis, the legal and ideological controls over the use of the drug reveal the overarching sentiment of unease toward the substance.

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Once upon a time, cannabis was not feared at all. In fact, it was used in a multitude of pharmaceuticals, and in 1850, cannabis was inducted into the U.S. Pharmacopeia—an official standards-setting for over-the-counter medicines.^{xiii} Cannabis was used to treat headaches, aid sleep, and even cure insanity.^{xiv}

The origins of the illegality of cannabis are undeniably intertwined with race, but the political framework of the U.S., and the propaganda that has bolstered that framework, pushed cannabis to the criminal status it has today. One of the most pivotal works of propaganda is the now cult classic film *Reefer Madness*. The film, produced in 1936, follows the story of several white teenagers who experiment with cannabis and are subsequently transformed into dangers to themselves and their society. The story is narrated to a group of high school parents by the character of Dr. Carroll, a high school principal, who uses a rhetoric of fear to construct the drug's danger. Today, the film has become a classic comedy for many cannabis users due to the absurdity of the false information that is relayed throughout the film. Perhaps most alarming and telling of the film's impact on mid-1900s cannabis policy are the opening credits that use scare tactics to warn against "[T]he frightful toll of the new drug menace which is destroying the

youth of America in alarmingly increasing numbers.”^{xv} The text continues: “Marihuana is that drug – a violent narcotic – an unspeakable scourge – The Real Public Enemy Number One!”^{xvi} Here, the rhetoric employed against cannabis portrays it as the most frightful substance to exist in U.S. society. The film calls for a prohibition of cannabis, as articulated through the naming of cannabis as The Real Public Enemy Number One, and contributes to the illegality and taboo of its use. The film also depicts the drug as addictive, madness-inducing, and inevitably leading to “acts of shocking violence.”^{xvii} However, none of these symptoms has been shown to actually affect users even though the film claims, “The scenes and incidents, while fictionalized for the purpose of this story, are based upon actual research into the results of Marihuana addiction.”^{xviii} Yet the incidents that take place in the film, while depicted as resulting from the cannabis high, could have occurred under the influence of any drug. Specifically, the incidents include a hit-and-run driving accident, a murder, a suicide, and attempted rape. All are caused by innocent middle-class white teenagers and are projected to U.S. citizens as a cautionary tale to parents and children alike. Whether or not the film influenced citizens and policy-makers is unclear, but the message it conveys mirrors the attitudes towards cannabis in the U.S. that were cultivated and displayed during the mid-1900s. The attitudes expressed in *Reefer Madness* are in alignment with the attitudes that led to the legal and social prohibition of cannabis as a schedule I narcotic in 1970.

There are two important political events to note as precursors to the banning of cannabis: The Mexican Revolution and the prohibition of alcohol. Before 1910, cannabis had been primarily used for medical purposes in the pharmaceutical industry. However, at the end of The Mexican Revolution in 1910, Mexican immigrants rushed into the U.S.

to escape the unrest after the war and introduced cannabis as a recreational substance.^{xix} The immigrants came to seek work in Texas and the U.S. Southwest, which was initially viewed as a great benefit to the economy.^{xx} However, when the Great Depression hit in 1929, immigrants began to be viewed as vagrants who were stealing viable jobs from U.S. citizens and as a result, quickly became unwelcome: “They were just foreigners, who had no right to keep real American citizens out of the job market.”^{xxi}

The end of prohibition in 1933 catalyzed the banning of cannabis. In 1937 Congress outlawed the sale, possession, and use of cannabis. Specifically, the Marijuana Tax Act (26 U.S. Code 4741) “placed a prohibitive tax on marijuana” which incriminated individuals who were involved in the cannabis industry.^{xxii}

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Today, “marijuana” is the most widely used term for *Cannabis sativa* in the U.S. However, it wasn’t always this way. Throughout the early colonization and settlement of the United States, “hemp” was commonly used to refer to the cannabis plant. Hemp was grown freely throughout the nation and early in U.S. history, “[A]ll citizens were actually *required by law* to grow hemp for the national good.”^{xxiii} Hemp was also prized for its versatility as a fiber and oil, which were the primary uses of the cannabis plant in the early years of U.S. growth. The psychological effects of smoking the leaves and flowers of the plant were known, but did not cause notable moral or political conflict until associated with race. When referring to the psychoactive components of the plant, the term “cannabis” was commonly used.^{xxiv}

“Marihuana,” or marijuana, is the Mexican-derived name for cannabis. The denigration of cannabis occurred alongside the condemnation of Mexican immigrants in the U.S., which was particularly instigated at a political level by Harry Anslinger, the first commissioner of the U.S. Treasury Department’s Federal Bureau of Narcotics. Anslinger took the term “marihuana” and used it as a tool against the substance in the tumultuous racial climate of the time. He rationalized that the term “marihuana” was Spanish-sounding, and thus could be used to align the substance with the fears evoked by Spanish-speaking immigrants who were “stealing” U.S. jobs.^{xxv} The term “marijuana” was used in racial propaganda throughout the first half of the 20th century and eventually became a normalized term in today’s culture. The normalization of the term speaks to the growing climate of cannabis acceptance in the U.S. but also unveils a hidden dilemma in our country’s dialogue pertaining to cannabis. “Marijuana” is the most widely used term to describe cannabis in the U.S., yet many people are unaware of the laden racial and ethnic meanings it is associated with. Likewise, marijuana is one of the most widely used drugs in the U.S., yet many people are unaware of the racial burden the drug has long carried. Even though the origin of the word “marijuana” is not widely known, the effects of its name reverberate in the intense racial stigmas associated with cannabis today. The derogatory language and stigmas surrounding cannabis have become ingrained, even normalized, in the everyday use of the substance.

While most U.S. citizens are aware of the illegality of cannabis, many do not realize the full extent to which it actually is illegal. John Kaplan, author of *Marijuana—the New Prohibition*, accounts for the extreme illegality of cannabis when he comments, “Until very recently, however, the criminal law in almost all states has treated marijuana

involvement as almost as serious as involvement in heroin, and considerably more so than involvement in LSD, the amphetamines, and the barbiturates.”^{xxvi} Cannabis is classified by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) as a schedule I narcotic, which places it in the same legal category as heroin, LSD, and ecstasy (MDMA). A schedule I narcotic is defined as a drug “With no currently accepted medical use and a high potential for abuse [...] with potentially severe psychological or physical dependence.”^{xxvii} In the eyes of the law, cannabis is seen as more dangerous than cocaine or methamphetamine, both of which are categorized as schedule II narcotics. Despite arguments to lower the legal severity of cannabis production and use, the drug has maintained its reputation as a dangerous substance with serious risks of impairment, and as such, is subject to meticulous regulation. However, the fine print of the classification of cannabis as a schedule I narcotic is contradictory given state medical marijuana laws. How can a substance be considered as having “no currently accepted medical use” when it is medically legal in 23 states? Secondly, the schedule I classification asserts an addictive quality to cannabis, yet cannabis has not been shown to cause dependence:

Experts assert that cannabis’s addictive power parallels caffeine’s (Franklin, 1990; Hilts, 1994). Hilts asked two prominent drug researchers to rank features of six common drugs: nicotine, caffeine, heroin, cocaine, alcohol, and marijuana. Both experts ranked marijuana last in its ability to produce withdrawal, tolerance, and dependence. Another study had experts rank 18 drugs on how easily they “hook” people and how difficult they are to quit. Marijuana ranked 14th behind the legal drugs nicotine (ranked first), alcohol (ranked 8th), and caffeine (ranked 12th).^{xxviii}

Heroin, LSD, and ecstasy (MDMA) have all been shown to cause dependence, and only LSD has begun to be seen as a medical treatment, and only in select circles, in the past few years. Thus, there must be something else about cannabis that has caused it to become imbued with such an immense stigma that it continues to be classified as a

schedule I narcotic given contrary evidence. The DEA's attitude towards cannabis is akin to a felon with a minor misdemeanor being imprisoned in a maximum-security prison.

Attitudes toward illicit drugs are harsh and highly reflexive within the U.S. and as such, total prohibition of illicit substances has long been viewed as the best way to limit drug use. The zero tolerance policy, "by which any drug offence, no matter how slight, was deemed as bad as the next, regardless of the substance involved or the culpability of the perpetrator," has led to billions of government expenditures and thousands of arrests.^{xxix} When it comes to drug policy in the U.S., the vaunted freedom that the country stands for seems to regress. U.S. law enforcement can "demand that any drug offender be remanded in custody prior to trial, with no leave to apply for bail."^{xxx} The DEA can also "search a person or private property without warrant or probable cause, entrap suspects with undercover agents or sting operations, apprehend (also without probable cause) and rely upon paid informers."^{xxxi} The enforcement tactics used by the DEA are often overlooked or even concealed, which detracts from the transparency that is thought to exist between the U.S. government and citizens. In *Cannabis*, Martin Booth describes the consequences of these enforcement tactics when he states, "[T]he federal authorities have deliberately created an atmosphere of fear. Whilst there are those who accept this as valid, it has still undermined the basic civil and human rights of tens of thousands of American citizens." Booth continues to mention that the methods of drug enforcement consistently overlook legislative rights as well, and "The Bill of Rights has, in effect, been systematically abused with no opportunity for redress."^{xxxii} When it comes to illicit drugs, the U.S. transforms into a police state where law enforcers perpetrate fear and uncertainty while the freedoms of the individual are vacated.

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However, there are certain groups and individuals who have recognized the contradictions between cannabis policy and use and have moved to change its legal status. Ethan Nadelmann, one of the foremost advocates for drug legalization, succinctly summarizes the current arguments for legalization when he states:

There are three reasons why it is important to think about legalization... First, current drug-control policies have failed ... because they are fundamentally flawed. Second, many drug control efforts are not only failing, but also proving highly costly and counterproductive... Third, there is a good reason to believe that repealing many of the drug laws would not lead ... to a dramatic rise in drug abuse.^{xxxiii}

It is necessary to note that Nadelmann is summarizing the arguments for the legalization of currently illicit drugs at large, not just cannabis specifically. The legalization debate focuses much of its energy on pushing the government out of attempting to control the supply and demand of drugs. Legalization advocates also claim that it is up to the individual to decide whether or not to use drugs. The idea that the government should not be able to exert control over individual freedom is sometimes referred to as the libertarian argument. Libertarianism advocates for freedom on many different levels, and libertarians believe that the government should intervene as little as possible in the affairs of the individual. Therefore the libertarian argument with regard to cannabis makes the case that the government should not be able to tell people whether or not they can choose to partake in the production and use of cannabis.

Cannabis is selectively sanctioned as an unacceptable mode of altering consciousness. It is socially verboten by the majority of the population, and the laws that

prohibit it are just symptoms of the greater societal fear that dictates the way that people talk and think about the substance. Many citizens question whether or not the substance will ever become federally legalized, but there are numerous components to the discussion that keep cannabis from becoming fully sanctioned. Questions of federal legalization aside, it is clear that cannabis instills more fear in U.S. society than almost any other mind-altering drug of similar capacities. While the substance was politically framed as a threat in the early 19th century, and continues to be framed as such today, the grounding for the fear does not stop there. Instead, the fear of the cannabis high is rooted much more deeply than is often thought and threatens the very perceptions we have of our own consciousness. While also symptomatic of a larger fear, it is necessary to turn to the racial dialogues pertaining to cannabis before exploring the threat the substance holds against our minds. As long as the public associates cannabis with the racial stigmas under which it was introduced into the U.S., the substance will not gain a clearer social understanding.

IV. Reefer and “Darkies”: Cannabis and Race

“Reefers make darkies think they’re as good as white men.”

- Harry Anslinger

The racial associations of cannabis are deeply ingrained in how the plant instigates terror. The racial component of cannabis is so centrally important to the plant’s historic status in U.S. culture and politics that even a non-user would find it easy to associate the plant with Hispanic or black bodies and culture. Racial associations are often derived from the political attitudes and legislation that has criminalized users and vilified the culture surrounding cannabis, which have both focused excessively on minority populations. The racial component is central to the cannabis debate, but is also telling of the hostile racial climate that runs both below and above the surface of greater U.S. culture. The racial associations of cannabis can thus be seen as both a product and an instigator of larger racial debates that have perpetuated a fear of minorities. In order to understand the nature of the terror induced by cannabis, it is helpful to explore how the substance has become so deeply linked to race.

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While grown and used across much of the Western world, cannabis finds its origins in Asia. As a plant of the East, cannabis has long been associated with Eastern stereotypes and people. Specifically, cannabis is often termed “hashish” in reference to its

early use in the Middle East. While hashish directly refers to the thick, sticky resin found on the leaves and flowers, it has broadened in modern times to become a referential term to the plant as a whole, and specifically, the psychotropic substances that are found within the plant. Clearly, “hashish” does not find its etymological roots in the West, and as such, the word works akin to the term “marijuana” to imbue the substance with racial associations.

Cannabis was used heavily in China and India before moving into the Western world. The Chinese used cannabis as an early medicine, an anesthetic for surgeries, and even as a psychedelic.^{xxxiv} In India, cannabis was often used in religious ceremonies to heighten the senses and connect with the gods more intensely.^{xxxv} The early African nations are thought to have discovered cannabis through trade with Asian markets, and once it was integrated into society, began to utilize the drug in religious ceremonies.^{xxxvi} Thus, when cannabis was introduced to the new world, it carried with it the associations of the places where it was first used. These associations were specifically non-Western and non-white. Cannabis was first seen, and continues to be seen, as a foreign substance whose users have often been referred to as “darkies.”^{xxxvii}

When cannabis first appeared in the U.S. it was primarily seen as a medicine and as the source of hemp. The psychological effects of the plant were known, but were not focused upon nor viewed as criminal. It was not until the late 1800s and early 1900s, when Chinese and Mexican immigrants flooded the U.S. and emphasized recreational use, that psychotropic drugs, including cannabis, became vilified. During the late 1860s, Chinese immigrants rushed into the U.S. to find work building a network of new railroads and, as happened later with Hispanics, were subsequently accused of ruining the

economy and stealing jobs from U.S. citizens. It is unclear as to whether or not the Chinese brought opium to the U.S., but regardless, “[T]he opium den became a visible symbol of the Chinese presence on the West Coast and as such became the target of anti-Chinese sentiment.”^{xxxviii} The connections between minorities and drugs added to the association of foreign immigrants with vagrant or dissipated behavior. The opium high, and subsequently the cannabis high, became sullied—something only for the lower minority classes.

A similar story follows Mexican immigrants upon entry into the U.S. after the Mexican Revolution in 1910. Looking for work and new opportunities, thousands of Mexican immigrants migrated to the U.S. Southwest and were immediately cast into a negative light due to their adherence to Catholicism, a “religion of dark superstition and ignorance” that ran contrary to U.S. Protestantism.^{xxxix} U.S. citizens also accused the immigrants of stealing viable jobs and stereotyped the Mexican as “a thief, an untamed savage, hot-blooded, quick to anger yet inherently lazy and irresponsible.”^{xl} Akin to the Chinese immigrants’ opium situation, Mexican immigrants were quickly associated with and vilified for associations with “marihuana.”

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Drugs, including cannabis, have long been associated with the arts—and in this realm, again, we see the emergence of racial associations. From the opium used by the Romantic poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, to the psychedelics used by the Beat writers, drugs were often associated and used in tandem with artistic experience. Cannabis has

strong ties to the music community through its widespread usage and relationship with black jazz culture in New Orleans and Harlem during the early-to-mid 1900s. In the U.S. South, musicians involved in “circuses, medicine shows, and saloons or working the Mississippi paddle-steamers” often used opiates and cocaine, before switching to cannabis.^{xli} Musicians in the cities began to experiment with cannabis and combined its use with the creation of a new genre of music: jazz. Along with jazz and cannabis came the establishment of a new black culture that was defined by its “anti-establishment stance, its idealism, its down-to-earth honesty and its vibrant music.”^{xlii} New Orleans, specifically, became the hot spot for the “new, invigorating, and risqué” music that found its origins in the brothels and red-light district of the city, which was referred to as Storeyville. When it came to creating music, alcohol and opiates were found to dull the senses. But scholars note that the cannabis high actually enhanced the musician’s creation of music and thus contributed heavily to the early development of jazz.^{xliii} However, many of the powerful citizens of New Orleans did not appreciate the burgeoning black culture, and in 1917 the city closed Storeyville, forcing the exodus of jazz musicians to numerous metropolitan centers in the U.S.^{xliv}

During the 1920s and 1930s, the black population of New York boomed and found its center in the borough of Harlem. In Harlem, cannabis use became heavily entwined with the rising jazz culture, and both cannabis and jazz worked together to create a community. Jazz culture provided a means of escape for urban blacks that had been displaced from their previous lives in Africa and the Southern U.S.^{xlv} In this way, the cannabis and jazz culture of Harlem was more than a subversive movement against the white status quo. Many white citizens at the time did not realize that the Harlem

Renaissance “was a seeking for identity by black people who had been displaced from their lives in the south.”^{xlvi} Jazz was characterized as black music that was created by black people, which was performed in dusty, hidden apartments where plumes of “reefer” wafted out the windows. During the Harlem Renaissance, cannabis also helped to create a new sub-genre of jazz that created the “reefer song,” illustrating the close ties between the artistic movement and psychotropic substance.^{xlvii}

Cannabis was primarily consumed in “tea pads,” or private rooms and apartments “where one could relax and talk with strangers or friends over a ‘reefer.’”^{xlviii} It was reported that in Harlem, “[T]here were more ‘tea pads’ than there had been speakeasies at the height of Prohibition.”^{xliv} The historical associations of black bodies and black culture with cannabis led the residents of Harlem to be viewed by the surrounding white population as being consumed by loose morals and crime-inducing drugs. Black musicians and jazz listeners came to be seen as creating a drug culture based around the consumption of cannabis. Cannabis played a pivotal role in establishing the black community of Harlem but in doing so, it also built the long-lasting stereotype of the black cannabis user.

While jazz and cannabis culture in New Orleans and Harlem have faded into the background, now catalogued in history books on dusty library shelves, the legacy left behind endures in aspects of modern popular culture. Cannabis has yet to be ubiquitously socially sanctioned, and part of that is due to the stigma of the black and Hispanic cannabis user. The modern-day cannabis culture is saturated with racial inequality, which becomes prominent in modern portrayals of and attitudes towards weed use. In modern

portrayals, cannabis often becomes a socially sanctioned high when used by the “right” people—i.e., prosperous white people.

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The socially sanctioned cannabis high for white bodies is apparent in the Vimeo series, *High Maintenance*. *High Maintenance* is an Internet series of nineteen short films that center on a drug dealer, dubbed “the guy,” in modern day New York City. Husband and wife pair Ben Sinclair and Katja Blichfeld created the show in 2012 as a partial examination of their own weed habits.¹ In each story, the drug dealer travels by bicycle to a different client in various parts of the city. Each episode lasts about five minutes and is titled with the featured client’s name. The show is comedic, smart, and fast-paced, yet also highlights the millennial weed culture that is primarily open to white users. Almost all of the episodes focus on white New Yorkers who range from families with kids to twenty-something exercise enthusiasts—emphasizing the prominence of the hip, white pot smoker in today’s weed culture.

In an episode titled “Stevie,” an overwhelmed assistant attempts to buy some cannabis for her demanding boss. The assistant, a young white female, opens the door to let the drug dealer enter a spacious, well-decorated apartment. She is clearly consumed with anxiety and frantically attempts to carry on a conversation with the drug dealer as she responds to texts and phone calls from her boss. The drug dealer suggests that she try some weed to help with her anxiety and then opens the door to leave. The scene then cuts to the drug dealer and assistant in the bathroom. Both are depicted as high, which is

acknowledged through pointed references to smoking and the characters' red eyes, as the episode comes to a close.

Each episode runs in a similar fashion: the drug dealer is depicted cycling past different vistas throughout New York City, a different client (usually young and white) opens a door to an apartment, a dramatized situation ensues, the end. Each client is depicted as young, white, and usually disheveled or facing some dilemma—a trope that other millennial comedy series such as *Broad City* and *Girls* focus on. The clients are highly fictionalized through exaggeration, but they find ways to be relatable through the same characterizations. All of the characters are connected through their affinity for cannabis and their ability to easily consume it without much consequence—something that minorities are generally not able to do.

In an interview with NPR, the show is said to depict “intimate narratives that treat marijuana as an everyday part of the otherwise interesting lives of Brooklyn’s creative class.”^{li} While *High Maintenance* does succeed at doing this, it does not do so unscathed. When assessed through the focus on white characters, it becomes clear that the show is able to succeed and gain acclaim because of its focus on the white weed smoker’s narrative. The young white body has an inherent privilege over the minority body when it comes to consuming cannabis. The white cannabis story is readily consumed, but the black or Hispanic cannabis narrative is oftentimes pushed to the side or intensely reviled. It would not be fully possible to create a successful, widely consumed intimate narrative of the black or Hispanic weed smoker in today’s cannabis culture that focuses on the white narrative. In other words, if *High Maintenance* had focused on black and Hispanic cannabis users, it probably would not have achieved the same acclaim that it has today.

Why? Black and Hispanic bodies do not have a place in the millennial weed culture nor are they usually portrayed in a positive light. A minority-heavy casting in *High Maintenance* might have lessened the show's success due to the rate at which minority weed culture is continually exterminated through stigmas and incarcerations.

Regardless of racial frames and commentaries, it is clear in *High Maintenance* that cannabis is not fully sanctioned. The exchanges of cannabis occur behind closed doors rather than in the open for the public to observe. The highs depicted in the show also take place behind closed doors. Thus, it is clear that in a state where cannabis is not fully legalized, no one is exempt from the laws and taboos surround cannabis. Racial and socioeconomic associations aside, cannabis is a schedule I narcotic and in the eyes of the law and much of the discerning public, its users are also schedule I criminals. Yet the label of cannabis users as a schedule I criminals rests on the surface of a larger fear that is attributed to how the high specifically affects the mind. The fear concerning the cannabis mind-alteration becomes further elucidated through an analysis of the prominence of alcohol as a psychotropic substance. The fear lies in the claim that while the alcohol high functions as a sensory anesthetic, the cannabis high functions as a sensory enhancement.

V. Cross Faded

Alcohol is perhaps the most widely used intoxicant in the U.S. and the world. In the U.S. specifically, alcohol has faced a series of obstacles that have threatened its legalization and acceptability. Today, these obstacles are largely forgotten and alcohol is seen as commonplace. It can be found on grocery store shelves next to bottled water and soda and makes appearances at every major sporting event. Alcohol is so readily accepted by modern U.S. society that presidents and high-powered politicians publically consume it, often without consequence.

A “socially sanctioned high” is one that is accepted by the current culture. At a basic level, the socially sanctioned high is allowed to exist and does not face restrictive legislation or taboos. Other socially sanctioned highs include the caffeine high, the medically sanctioned pharmaceutical high (such as Codeine for a cough or Vicodin taken after a surgery), and in many cases, cigarettes. Unlike the psychedelic high, sanctioned psychotropic highs are not prohibited legally and would not cause an alarming amount of discomfort for an average citizen who is exposed to public usage. Alcohol functions in the same way as other socially sanctioned psychotropic highs, which are experienced readily and without concern by the majority of the U.S. population. Cannabis, on the other hand, is not socially sanctioned. It causes enormous public concern and is legally regulated.

However, imagine if cannabis were to be substituted in place of alcohol in certain common situations. Picture two parents with their kids, leisurely passing a joint back and forth at a sporting event. Imagine President Barack Obama placing a bong on the podium as he addresses the crowd at the White House Correspondents Dinner. It is not only difficult to imagine—it is in many ways impossible. Yes, our mind can picture the static image of Barack Obama standing on a pedestal next to a bong, but we cannot grasp the massively negative response that such an event would instigate. The majority of the U.S. is alarmingly distrustful of cannabis and becomes outraged by its very mention, let alone public use.

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Yet most U.S. citizens forget that alcohol was once viewed in the light that cannabis is currently viewed in. From 1920 to 1933, the prohibition of alcohol criminalized its users and manufacturers. In the mid-1800s, temperance and prohibitionist societies began to gain clout because of arguments against alcohol concerning negative health effects, social disruption, religious values, and nationalism.^{lii} Some organizations placed emphasis on all of these concerns while most focused on tackling one cause through protests and publishing pamphlets. The organizations' messages varied in rhetoric but all centered on the same message of abstaining from alcohol. In his book *Alcohol*, Rod Phillips describes these organizations, noting, "Organizations with religious affiliations justified their positions by appeal to scripture, while others drew on secular and utilitarian arguments."^{liii} The women's temperance movement provides an example of such secular and utilitarian arguments through the organization's focus on the threat of

alcohol to family life and cohesion. The organization perceived alcohol use as a mode of disrupting sexual morality and inter-family relations.^{liv} It was thought that alcohol was the catalyst for violence and social disobedience. Temperance organizations argued that total prohibition would rid society of its ills, specifically focusing on poverty and immorality. In essence, alcohol became the scapegoat for many of society's problems.

In 1920, the 18th amendment was passed, declaring the production, transport, and sale of alcohol illegal in the U.S.^{lv} Proponents of the 18th amendment believed that the total prohibition of alcohol would force citizens to become "healthier, more moral, and more law-abiding."^{lvi} To say that prohibition was a flop is putting it mildly—the results of the amendment's passage were not only unexpected by policy makers and temperance groups, but instigated an economic downturn and a rise in illicit behavior. During the prohibition era, "[D]rinking became more fashionable than ever and led to a decline in social behavior [and] the immoderate law could not be enforced[.] [P]rohibition brought about greater corruption in city government and an increase in gangsterism and racketeering."^{lvii} On the economic side, the number of breweries producing beer fell from 1,300 in 1916 to zero in 1926, distilleries declined by 85 percent, and the number of wineries declined from 318 in 1914 to 27 in 1925.^{lviii} Tax revenues decreased and thousands of alcohol industry workers became unemployed.

The prohibition era elicits popularized images of speakeasies, moonshine, and Mafia-related organized crime. While these experiences were a part of the era, they have been sensationalized over time. As Phillips points out, "[M]illions of Americans, whether they were men or women, whether they lived in town or country, whether they were workers, farmers, and professionals or in business [resisted prohibition]."^{lix} Resistance

led to illicit alcohol production within the U.S. and an increase in alcohol smuggling from outside national borders. Both of these consequences demonstrate the ineffectiveness of the legislation and the resulting undermining of rules set forth by the U.S. government. The overwhelming amount of civil disobedience during prohibition inundated the judicial system and as a result, courts found themselves flooded and scrambling to find judges to clear cases.^{lx} Organized crime rose to prominence for creating and maintaining supply chains in underground liquor markets. Criminal groups were often reported in the news and gave rise to the celebrity of the Mafia and Al Capone. Overall, the prohibition of alcohol did not create temperance in the U.S. Instead, it forced citizens to take their drinking underground where it evaded regulation and became perceived as even more dangerous than it had been before 1920.

The reasons for why prohibition failed are many, but one of the main issues pertains to the habituation of alcohol. Alcohol was fully habituated in U.S. society by the 1920s, which means that most U.S. citizens at the time of prohibition were not raised with regulations or taboos surrounding the substance and thus, were not receptive to the new law. If citizens do not believe in the law, then they are less likely to obey it. Furthermore, disregard for the law does not stop illicit behavior, but rather pushes illicit activities underground where the potential for harm increases due to a lack of regulation.

Overall, the prohibition era signaled a shift in the symbolic meaning of alcohol from a generally innocuous substance to a societal evil. While it did eventually reclaim its previous reputation, and is now regarded by most as ordinary, its legacy has influenced current attitudes towards cannabis. According to Sean Cashman in his book *Prohibition*, “[Prohibition] has [...] remained a point of reference for all governments

subsequently contemplating bans on commodities such as cigarettes and marijuana. Its failure is cited as proof that such bans are bound to backfire.”^{lxi}

So what is it about the nature of alcohol that has led it to become socially sanctioned while cannabis has remained verboten? Today, it is startling to compare the conflicted status of cannabis with that of alcohol during the 1900s, as the prohibition movements of each substance are strikingly similar. However, there are a handful of key differences that set the movements, and substances, apart from each other. One difference is that while alcohol was socially sanctioned well before—and even during—prohibition, cannabis, and specifically recreational cannabis, is only recently gaining acceptance. Today, the socially sanctioned status of cannabis is in flux and the substance straddles the line between acceptance and repression. The social flux of cannabis is largely due to how it functions with consciousness. Cannabis functions very differently with the mind than alcohol, and is threatening to the enlightened West. The key is that while alcohol functions as a sensory anesthetic, cannabis functions as a mode of sensory enhancement.

Alcohol has long been associated with food and the culinary arts. As a beverage containing sugars and carbohydrates, it holds a certain degree of nutrient value. The pairing of alcohol with meals is an intricate and long-standing tradition upon which individuals have built their livelihoods. Sommeliers and craft beer experts learn how to pair alcohol with various occasions and meal ingredients, helping to form a culture around the substance. There is a gourmet, highbrow aspect to some forms of alcohol that cannabis has yet to ubiquitously acquire. While there is a certain measure to which alcohol is a status symbol and marker of refinement and taste, cannabis has not achieved this reputation.

Yet, cannabis is trying to appeal to the sentiment of the gourmet through the rhetoric used to describe it in dispensaries. For an example of this rhetoric, I ventured to the local recreational dispensary in my hometown to explore the descriptions on the menu. The menu was expansive and comparable to, if not more detailed than, the wine, beer, and cocktail menus I have seen at many restaurants. In general, there is an elevated degree of playfulness to the naming and descriptions of cannabis strains, especially in comparison to the naming of alcohol. The names are often highly colloquial and humorous. Some examples include: Aliens on Moonshine (Indica), Thunderfuck (Sativa), Space Queen (Hybrid), and Dirty Widow (Hybrid).^{lxii} Varying strains are described through small details that relate to taste and aroma. The high is focused on, but is often delineated as, secondary to the initial sensory experience. For example, the menu describes Pink Lemonade (Indica) by saying, “The fragrant terpenes wafting from this thick and curvaceous flower tell us she has some killer genetics. Your 1st toke brings on the flowery sour of guava blossom liquor and lemon zest, exhaling into a pink lemonade smoke.”^{lxiii} The language is casual yet descriptive, which makes the substance seem inviting and surprisingly food-like. Cannabis is not primarily a food and is not prized for its nutritional value or flavor through isolated ingestion—it is a substance that has primarily been used for its psychoactive properties, rather than its taste. Before selective legalization, it did not matter for most people if it had musky aromas and a citrus flavor—cannabis was cannabis and it was consumed for the high. While connoisseurs have existed prior to today’s political shifts, it has only been through recent selective legalization that proponents of the plant have been able to embrace and advertise its gourmet qualities.

Throughout the second half of the 20th century, alcohol also became heavily associated with the hard-working male. In the late 1940s, alcohol became intertwined with “business and suburban sociability.”^{lxiv} It became common for middle-and-upper-class men to sip on whiskey during some business meetings and cocktails became “more popular in the United States than anywhere else, and middle-class men (and fewer women) enjoyed the cocktail hour at the end of the workday.”^{lxv} In this way, alcohol became a mode of respite for the progressive elite during the latter half of the 1900s. While poorer populations also consumed alcohol, the association with the upper and middle classes allowed it to largely become associated with success and progress. A drink, or several, at the end of the day was a way to relax and prepare for another day of industrial productivity. In this way, the clean martini became an accepted mode of “getting high,” but the dirty joint was still associated with minority and vagrant populations.

The counter-culture movement of the 1960s worked against the tenets of mid-century capitalist society and greatly influenced popular perceptions of psychedelics. By the early 1960s, “Marijuana was no longer a poor Mexican or black drug” and was used in increasing numbers by white middle-class citizens.^{lxvi} Cannabis came to be seen as not only a mode of getting high, but also as a way to question and work against the status quo. During the 1960s counter-culture movement, the older generation and traditions were placed under scrutiny by a mass of young people who wished to instigate change. One change called for the legalization of cannabis, which has been viewed as an antithesis to U.S. progress and ideals. Cannabis “delivered emancipation the like of which [the counter-culture generation] could never have dreamed.”^{lxvii} At the same time,

lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) was introduced to the population and also fell under scrutiny. Drug writers such as Aldous Huxley, Allen Ginsberg, and Timothy Leary helped to popularize drug use and “actively encouraged people to take certain drugs, predominantly marijuana but also other hallucinogens.”^{lxviii} The middle-class young flocked to these writings, and soon, legalization campaigns were sprouting across the nation.

From the counter-culture movement came the terms “hippie” and “stoner.” Both terms are often paired together and are contrary to the overarching tenets of U.S. progress. In this way, the hippie-stoner came into conflict with the western ways of thinking that were viewed as “right” or “proper.” The hippie-stoner sought to rebel from western culture, defined by consumption and Enlightened thought, through an expansion of spiritual ideology. It is telling that 60s drug culture and the environmental moment intersected at the same time. Both movements constituted a discovery, or even rediscovery, of a relationship between humans and the land. One way to leave behind the constraints of western progress and to realign with the physical landscape was through the use of psychedelics.

Alcohol is used by a large portion of the population and thus affects the behavior of much of the U.S. population on a daily basis. Thus, it is helpful to understand the nature of the alcohol high in order to assess how much of the U.S. chooses to orient the mind. Alcohol can have a bad reputation, for good reason. However, it does have some health benefits including relaxation, stress reduction, and protection against heart disease if consumed at a moderate level.^{lix} Alcohol depresses the activity of the entire brain, so much so that in the 19th century, “alcohol was widely used as a general anesthetic.”^{lxx} The

term “depressant” refers to alcohol’s inward focus as it slows the central nervous system. Alcohol also interacts with the same brain circuits targeted by Valium and other benzodiazepines that act as tranquilizers.^{lxxi} There is a reason why alcohol is used so often after a long day at work or after an especially stressful or traumatic event; it numbs the physical and emotional senses.

The initial alcohol high leads the drinker to become happy and talkative but also affects judgment, fine motor coordination, and reaction time.^{lxxii} As blood alcohol content increases, the drinker can become nauseated, begin to slur speech, and stagger as motor coordination and reflexes are impaired.^{lxxiii} At dangerous levels of consumption, the drinker can become comatose or even dead as sensation, movement, breathing, and heart function decline.^{lxxiv} The alcohol high has startling impacts on perception, emotions and abstract thought, and many chronic drinkers find that they are unable to retain and form new memories.^{lxxv} More startlingly, chronic drinkers are often unable to engage in abstract thought—i.e., thinking in ways that are not tied directly to concrete things.^{lxxvi} Chronic drinkers are unable to think beyond what is directly in front of them, and “it is as if abstract thoughts do not come to mind as easily for the chronic drinker.”^{lxxvii} Moreover, alcohol is an addictive substance and as such, anyone who drinks enough alcohol for a sustained duration of time has a chance of forming dependence.

Alcohol isn’t the only socially sanctioned psychotropic drug that numbs the system. Anti-depressants, anti-anxiety medications, sleep aids, and over-the-counter pain relievers all act as sensory anesthetics. Numbing agents do have some benefits but are also used by millions of U.S. citizens, meaning that much of the population at any given

time is experiencing an altered state of reality. Cannabis and psychedelics also induce altered states of reality, but the resulting experiences are far from numbing.

Much of Western society classifies any substance usage as a direct road to mental and physical *impairment* instead of *enhancement*. While science has shed light on ways in which substances such as marijuana can benefit the mind and body, the majority of society has not recognized the benefits of certain psychotropic drugs. Thus, the neurological enhancements associated with cannabis have been pushed to the side, and the substance has been widely cast as a dangerous intoxicant that leads to impairment. With an increasing number of states moving to legalize recreational marijuana, the legal and scientific definitions and measurements of impairment are in need of closer examination and reevaluation. The most comprehensive interrogation of the effect of cannabis on the human body and brain can be found in a report by the National Commission on Marihuana and Drug Abuse, which was commissioned by President Richard Nixon in 1972. However, even that report stipulates that “The effect of marihuana on cognitive and psychomotor performance is [...] highly individualized and not easily predictable. Effects on emotional reactions and on volition are equally variable and are difficult to measure under the laboratory conditions.”^{lxxviii} But the fervent need to define and measure impairment has been solidified at an administrative level that has designated cannabis as a schedule I narcotic, contributing to the opinion that “Marijuana policy has never been driven by science in this country.”^{lxxix} While alcohol functions as a sensory anesthetic, cannabis functions as a mode of sensory enhancement. This enhancement is due to the innate nature of the cannabis high and instigates a deep-seated fear of the substance.

VI. The Libertarian Paradox

“The fact is that America is now, and has always been, a nation of pill poppers. At the same time, it is a nation that prides itself on the virtues of temperance and hard work.” - Ernest Abel

Although politically forbidden, cannabis currently straddles the line between cultural liberation and repression. While the majority of the U.S. population does not advocate for the legalization or use of cannabis, the substance has found liberation through millennial drug culture and various legalization movements. These factors have distanced cannabis from its historically racial and political stigmas, which has led to a newfound acceptance of the drug. Cannabis acceptance is prominent, and growing, in liberal states and liberal social factions. Through middle class and white associations, the culture that currently accepts cannabis use and legalization is reminiscent of certain aspects of the counter-culture of the 1960s. The existence of the current pro-cannabis culture, at the same time as the dominant anti-cannabis culture, has created a libertarian paradox that brings light to the specific fears instigated by the cannabis high.

At one level, the libertarian paradox surrounding cannabis is a political and social response to the forbidden. The U.S. was founded on tenets of individual rights and freedoms, as articulated in the Bill of Rights and Constitution. Thus, there is a pride and strong attachment to the sanctity and protection of individual rights and freedoms at a political and individual level. The libertarian stance seeks to protect individual rights,

especially through a concept of choice—that society should not be given the power to make decisions for the individual. The libertarian concept of choice became apparent during prohibition when the state restricted the individual freedom to produce and consume alcohol. In the name of protecting society from its ills, the government that was built on the pillars of individual freedom began to restrict the individual by criminalizing certain expressions of personal choice.

During prohibition, the underground, citizen-based drinking culture that formed in retaliation to restricted personal freedoms undermined the law and eventually overthrew the entire operation. The resounding sentiment of the law-breaking population was that the state should not be able to make decisions for individual citizens regarding the consumption of alcohol. Today, many cannabis legalization movements reference this idea, specifically drawing upon political economist and philosopher John Stuart Mill's 1859 treatise *On Liberty*. Mill's work is often used to direct the libertarian discussion surrounding governmental restrictions on individual rights, especially when it comes to the use of substances. Mill states, “[T]here is no room for entertaining any such question [of whether the general welfare will or will not be promoted] when a person's conduct affects the interest of no persons besides himself.”^{lxxx} Pot advocates often argue that individuals should not be apprehended for their behavior unless they affect the well-being of others. Mill's idea, that the general welfare will be promoted until an individual's actions affect the interest of another person, supports this idea and has helped to determine the rhetoric used by many cannabis legalization movements. However, Mill's claim also points to a greater paradox within U.S. society surrounding the fear and acceptance of cannabis.

In the discussion of cannabis, both a libertarian argument and counter-argument are present. Even within the states that have legalized cannabis, there is still a resoundingly loud voice of opposition to the privileging of personal choice when it comes to drug use. For many opponents, the question of whether cannabis is legal or illegal is not the issue; the issue is whether cannabis should be used at all. The call for total prohibition is rooted in notions of serving the social good by abiding by laws. Cannabis prohibition also draws upon the idea that the proponents of drug control are also the mediators and exemplars of societal ethics.

Some of these views derive from a loathing by association since cannabis has commonly been viewed as a drug for minorities. However, it is also linked to a greater cross-cutting tendency of U.S. politics which shows historically that no matter what is labeled as unacceptable by the dominant society, many people will find an attraction to the forbidden. There is a certain accepted boundary of individual freedoms within the U.S. and anything that falls outside of that boundary becomes verboten. The psychedelic and cannabis highs exist outside of the boundary of freedom and are thus forbidden.

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The libertarian paradox is made more complex when viewed in light of the general acceptance of alcohol in the U.S. Since prohibition, alcohol has become ubiquitously used, and a vast majority of scholars and citizens agree that prohibiting the substance contributed to an increase in its illicit use and the resulting failure of the prohibition movement. Even individuals who might have been prohibitionists during

prohibition, such as the individuals who comprise religious groups and culturally conservative factions of society, might agree that a complete ban on an undesirable substance does not work. While there are populations today that choose to abstain from drinking for various political, moral, or religious reasons, the dissolution of the entire alcohol industry is not called for. Yet the cannabis industry's existence is often called into question.

It is paradoxical that the majority of the U.S. population argues for a ban on cannabis when it can be argued that a majority of the population accepts the consumption of alcohol and views prohibition as a failure. There is something paradoxical in the midst of the "land of the free" that leads to the continuous repression of certain individual freedoms with regards to intoxication. At the heart of the paradox is the fear that cannabis engenders which is represented by the harsh criminal consequences of using cannabis in much of the country. The fear is also present in assessing the majority of the electorate in many states, where pot advocates are viewed as senseless and morally loose. Yet the same majority that is enforcing the legal penalties and societal attitudes toward cannabis are drinking a pint of beer while doing so. So, what is it about cannabis in particular that provokes such a high degree of fear while another mind-altering substance (alcohol) is socially sanctioned?

VII. Scientific Jargon and the “Safety” of Drugs

While assessing the distinct nature of the cannabis high and the fear that it elicits, it is first important to understand the characteristics of the fear itself. The fear concerning cannabis is greater in scale than most common fears, due to its political and social consequences, and can thus be characterized as *terror*.

Terror, or extreme fear, is not a foreign sentiment for the U.S. public. Terror is evident in the wars we involve ourselves in and the racial debates that ripple throughout society. Terror is what sometimes occurs when our very basic national ideals are interfered with. The United States is bound by tenets of industrialism, productivity, and achievement, all of which point towards a notion of overwhelming progress. Through westward expansion, the space race, and the creation of multi-national corporations, the U.S. has a long history of aligning with progress in order to maintain a dominant economy and sense of nationalism. In almost every dimension of our society it is clear that the U.S. is hyper-driven towards greater levels of productivity and forward momentum on both an individual and institutional level. Terror in the U.S. is thus partly derived from anything that is contrary to the ideal of progress.

Enter drugs, and specifically, psychedelics. Psychedelic substances have long been viewed as inhibitors to progress. While many psychotropic substances are accepted and have been integrated into the daily lives of U.S. citizens, psychedelics are vilified and

stereotyped. This is perhaps due to the hallucinatory altered states that are commonly associated with psychedelic, but not necessarily psychotropic, substances. Cannabis is at the forefront of the discussion pertaining to the acceptance of the psychedelic mind alteration due to its widespread use. However, cannabis carries with it a host of stereotypes that prevent it from being associated with progress (i.e., the “couch stoner” and “lazy darkie”). In *Marijuana—The New Prohibition*, John Kaplan argues that the objections to cannabis are not based upon the actual effects of the drug, but upon the lifestyle and stereotypes associated with it. Kaplan notes:

In a large portion of our population [...] marijuana is associated with a life-style focusing on immediate experience, present rather than delayed gratification, noncompetitiveness and lessened interest in the acquisition of wealth. And even if one is not prepared to use even stronger terms, such as irresponsibility, laziness, and a lack of patriotism, there is no doubt that the lifestyle, like the use of the drug itself, involves a disregard for many of the conventions that the older society regards as dear.^{lxxxix}

The lifestyle associated with cannabis use, he argues, is why much of the population supports the criminalization of cannabis; if anything, a prohibition of cannabis can be an affirmation that the user lifestyle is of lesser value. Overall, U.S. society is terrified of the experience that the cannabis high provides. The cannabis high is perceived as contrary to ideals of progress that each individual is expected to abide by as citizens of the U.S.

...

“To fathom Hell or soar angelic, just take a pinch of psychedelic,” scientist Humphry Osmond commented in 1953.^{lxxxiii} Osmond coined the term “psychedelic” and provided Aldous Huxley with the dose of mescaline that formed the inspiration for *The*

Doors of Perception.^{lxxxiii} Deriving from the Greek “psyche” and “delos,” the term psychedelic directly translates to “mind manifesting.”^{lxxxiv} Taken as a verb, “manifest” is synonymous with “display” or “reveal,” both of which connote a showing of something that is perhaps commonly hidden. While “brain” is associated with the physical organism inside of the skull, “mind” is aligned with consciousness and thought. Thus, when “manifest” is paired with “mind,” it can be assumed that something within the realm of consciousness, rather than the brain, is being dusted off and revealed.

Cannabis is not normally thought to be a psychedelic. While it does not produce the same degree of hallucinatory experiences as other well-known psychedelics such as LSD or psilocybin, cannabis is classified as both a psychedelic and hallucinogen. The experiential high of cannabis is difficult to put into words. In order to do so effectively, one must be able to describe the sensory experiences of consciousness and how the same experiences change after being exposed to cannabis. As Mitch Earleywine notes in *Understanding Marijuana*, “Describing simple changes in perception or emotion remains difficult enough during the most sober and wakeful moments. Add the confounding effects of drugs, and words can fail to portray experience.”^{lxxxv} Also adding to the difficulty of describing the cannabis high is the wide variety of experiences felt by differing users, as the drug affects different people in different ways. The environment in which the substance is consumed also greatly affects the experience. However, there is a general set of symptoms that cannabis users commonly describe as contributing to the experience. In *Understanding Marijuana*, Mitch Earleywine describes these experiential sensations by notating the following list:

Perceptions

Time slows; space appears more vast; senses appear enhanced.

Emotions

Euphoria increases; relaxation increases; feelings seem stronger; fear increases at high doses.

Thoughts

Focus on the present increases; forgetfulness increases.

Sexuality

Orgasms appear enhanced; responsiveness appears enhanced.

Spirituality

Openness to experience increases; sense of the divine increases.

Sleep

Improves at low doses; shows impairment at high doses.

Undesirables

Concentration appears impaired; depersonalization; eyes redden; mouth and other mucous membranes lose moisture.^{lxxxvi}

While these symptomatic experiences do not contain all of the potential sensations felt while experiencing the cannabis high, they are necessary to mention in order to highlight the degrees of enhancement that can be attained. The “undesirables” of consuming cannabis are not life-threatening or medically concerning. Cannabis does indisputably alter consciousness, but does not do so in a way that leads to more impairment than enhancement. However, it is still necessary to ask how exactly cannabis alters consciousness as a psychedelic.

There are four categories that are used to classify psychedelic drugs: serotonergic psychedelics, empathogens/entactogens, dissociatives, and cannabinoids. Serotonergic psychedelics include DMT, psilocybin, LSD, and mescaline. Empathogens/entactogens include MDMA (ecstasy) and its derivatives while dissociatives include PCP, morphinans, and nitrous oxide. In the popular mind, marijuana is usually not thought of

as a psychedelic due to its milder effects when compared to its psychedelic counterparts such as LSD and MDMA. However, cannabinoids comprise a primary psychedelic category.

Psychedelic drugs are non-addictive and stimulate the central nervous system while narcotics are shown to create physical dependence and depress the central nervous system.^{lxxxvii} Thus, narcotic drugs such as morphine, heroin, cocaine, alcohol, and barbiturates, while psychoactive, are not considered to be psychedelic.

The cannabinoid psychedelic group includes compounds that are found in the *Cannabis sativa* plant. While cannabis is composed of hundreds of cannabinoids, not all cannabinoids are shown to be psychoactive. When looking at the psychoactive and psychedelic properties of the cannabis plant, one compound in particular stands out. Delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (Δ^9 -THC), more commonly known as THC, is a compound found within the trichomes, or resin-filled glands, of the cannabis plant. Israeli scientist Raphael Mechoulam discovered THC in 1964.^{lxxxviii} THC is synthesized when Tetrahydrocannabinolic Acid (THCA), found in raw cannabis, is broken down through heat or vaporization. THC acts as a partial agonist at the CB1 and CB2 receptors of the brain, which means that it partially binds to certain receptors to enhance a biological response.^{lxxxix}

When scientists began to deepen studies of how cannabis affects the brain, an entirely new system of receptors within the human body—the endocannabinoid system—was discovered. In his article, “Introduction to CSAM’s (California Society of Addiction Medicine) Evidence-Based Information on Cannabis/Marijuana,” Timmen Cermak describes how scientists discovered the endocannabinoid system and how it functions.

First, scientists discovered that when THC enters the body, it washes over the entirety of the brain before binding to certain receptors, which were then named CB1 (cannabinoid-1) and CB2 (cannabinoid-2) receptors. According to Cermak, “these sites are like locks that only permit molecules shaped similar to THC to slip into and activate.”^{xc} The discovery of CB1 and CB2 receptors led scientists to question why our body contains a specific system, the endocannabinoid system, that is hardwired to get us high. In 1992, Raphael Mechoulam discovered that cannabinoids are naturally occurring in the human system and that “the most primitive nervous systems known employ CB1 receptors [...] which shows that the endocannabinoid system has been an integral part of nervous systems, and brains, throughout evolution.”^{xi} Thus, the questions for scientists began to center around how THC mimics our naturally occurring cannabinoids.

When THC is introduced into the body, it binds to the brain’s CB1 & CB2 receptors, disrupting the natural balance of the endocannabinoid system. Thus, it alters the chemical balance of the brain—creating an “altered” state of mind.

All of this is to say, well, nothing really—nothing in that biochemical and symptomatic dialogues ring hollow. Biochemical and physiological studies regarding the cannabis plant are wildly abundant but are quite beside the point when it comes to understanding the felt experience of the psychedelic high. Written scientific reports on cannabis are far more plentiful than philosophical or sociological writings about the same subject, which points to a larger problem pertaining to the relationship between scientific thought and the natural world. Cannabis, along with many other living entities, is often primarily understood through biological definitions. The biochemical and empirical

rhetoric involved in describing cannabis is used as a tool of translation for the public. If something can be explained scientifically, then society can claim to understand it. Furthermore, if we are able to claim to “know” something, then we can begin to classify it as “good” or “bad,” safe or terror-inducing. Yet simplistic value judgments are too reductive—perhaps cannabis is not “good” or “bad,” “safe” or “dangerous.” Perhaps cannabis actually acts as a medium for discussing a greater fear of altering consciousness.

While more biochemical research does need to be done specifically to address the effects and potential benefits and dangers of marijuana and other psychedelic drugs, it is not the only research that needs to be done. With regards to marijuana and other psychotropic drugs, scientific dialogues are often privileged and sweep aside other underlying discussions. In the case of psychotropic, and specifically psychedelic, interactions with the body, scientific study is limiting. It is only able to describe a fraction of the experience—the biological or biochemical experience. Scientific language and rhetoric does not, and cannot, fully account for the felt experience of the altered mind. Instead, the dialogue compartmentalizes the experience with the use of a rhetoric that allows it to be labeled as “understood.” In this way, the scientific discourse surrounding cannabis is a way for the drug to be classified as “safe” by virtue of its being “understood.” The scientific dialogue is actually a marker of our fear pertaining to the cannabis high—we will not allow ourselves to move beyond empirical observations of the high and ignore discussions concerning the felt experience in the process. The need to render cannabis rhetorically “safe” leads to a central question: What is it about the specific nature of the cannabis high that is so forbidding?

In *Marijuana: The Second Trip*, Edward Bloomquist notes, “Mild pot may indeed be ‘mild,’ but if one goes up the scale and takes a weed with a high resin content, he may precipitate many of the effects of the LSD experience.”^{xcii} It is through comparison to other changes in consciousness that we can begin to understand the cannabis high. LSD is one of the first substances that comes to mind when the word “psychedelic” is articulated. LSD’s hallmarked hallucinatory experiences are usually not viewed in relation to cannabis, which is often thought of as producing a more benign high. Bloomquist draws upon quotes from Charles Baudelaire’s written experiences while high on cannabis in order to attempt to describe the felt experience of the psychedelic cannabis high. Baudelaire, a 19th century French poet and founding member of a notable Parisian cannabis club, remarks that the cannabis trip is akin to a vast dream that exists on the periphery of reality. He notes, ““It will always [...] retain the private tonality of the individual. The man wanted the dream, now the dream will govern the man.”^{xciii} Baudelaire begins to articulate the fear of the cannabis high by noting that while the substance affects the brain, the brain will decidedly assume control of the experience.

VIII. Back to the Future

The terror associated with the cannabis high is deeply embedded in notions of rational consciousness, which prioritize methods of logic and empiricism above any other form of thought. Cannabis, and other psychedelics, creates an epistemological crisis for the western mind through a de-centering of the Enlightened intellect, or the rational self. When René Descartes wrote *Discourse on Method*, he established a dogma of consciousness that infiltrated almost every corner of western thought. Whether we are consciously aware of it or not, each of us abides by the metaphysical reality created by Descartes.

Cogito ergo sum.

I think, therefore I am.

Descartes' short phrase created an epistemology that led to the privileging of mind, or intellect, over matter. In Part IV of *Discourse on Method*, Descartes notes that in the search for Truth, he thought it necessary to reject as false everything that had even a small amount of doubt in order to “see if afterwards there remained anything in my belief that was entirely certain.”^{xciiv} By observing his perceptions, Descartes came to believe that everything that had ever entered into his mind was “no more true than the illusions of

[his] dreams.”^{xcv} By transforming his mind into a passive receiver, he came to the conclusion that only the “I” that was able to perceive the world rationally could exist and be True. In positing the “I,” or the rational intellect, as a singular truth, Descartes eliminated the significance of other forms of consciousness and posited the rational mind over all forms of matter. In his essay “Cartesian Dualism: Theology, Metaphysics, and Science,” John Cottingham describes the rational intellect by noting that “there is a ‘real’ [...] distinction between the mind and body [...] The thinking thing that is ‘me’ is ‘really’ distinct from the body and can exist without it.”^{xcvi} Descartes’ thesis of incorporeality engenders existence only by way of the mind and isolates the cognitive abilities of the mind to its capacity for rational thought. In this way, it is only our capacity for rational thought that brings about our very existence.

While Descartes’ thoughts have laid a greatly important foundation for rational and empirical discovery in the western world, they have also created distance between humans and our physical surroundings. The alienation of matter from mind has become so exaggerated that we often do not realize that nature is physically surrounding us. Instead, western society imposes the paramount rational mind onto the physical world to such a degree that nature becomes static and voiceless. The rational mind is not able to acknowledge the abstracted linguistics of the natural world because it is only trained to recognize its own linguistic tradition. In this way, enlightened reason has distanced the mind from its “primitive consciousness” that connects it to nature through an acknowledgement of Myth, the non-human other, and earth-based religiosity. In this way, the dogma of rational consciousness posits man as an island that is isolated from the matter that makes up the natural world. Rationality is ingrained to such a degree that man

is alienated from the matter of his own body and is unable to recognize himself as a manifestation of, and actor within, nature. The cannabis high challenges these centuries-old dogmas and presents a new, or forgotten, epistemology that resurrects a primitive consciousness that generates a greater awareness of the mind and its role in nature.

...

In order to further elucidate the relationship between the cannabis high and consciousness it is necessary to explore in depth accounts of the psychedelic experience. I will first explore the felt high through Carl Sagan's little-known essay "Mr. X," and then move to Aldous Huxley's psychedelic narrative, *The Doors of Perception*. Both authors come closer than most in putting words to the felt experience of the psychedelic high and how it relates to rational consciousness—Huxley through the mescaline high and Sagan through the cannabis high.

Carl Sagan was one of the world's preeminent figures in the field of astronomy and was able to communicate the excitement of his field to portions of the public that had never been exposed to astrophysics. Known best for his popular television series *Cosmos* and his contributions to NASA, Sagan is revered among scholars and space enthusiasts alike. Unbeknownst to many, Sagan also experimented with cannabis and in 1969, wrote "Mr. X," which was later published in Harvard psychiatrist Lester Grinspoon's *Marihuana Reconsidered*. In the short essay, Sagan describes some of his hallucinatory experiences while using cannabis and provides a justification for why he believes the drug should be legalized.

Sagan's first cannabis high brought him to the level of hallucination. After attempting to get high several times with much disappointment, he mentions how one night "it happened," and that what happened next was beyond the scope of his imagination.^{xcvii} In his narrative, Sagan finds himself lying on his back examining shadows on the ceiling of a room that begin to vividly represent an "intricately detailed miniature Volkswagen."^{xcviii} Surprised, he closes his eyes and mentions that he "was stunned to find that there was a movie going on inside of [his] eyelids."^{xcix} Sagan did not actually believe that what he was experiencing was a part of his ordinary reality and clarifies that he was able to understand the hallucinations as a product of the high. He then determines that cannabis is psychotomimetic, or mimics the symptoms of psychosis through hallucinations, delirium, and delusions.^c

Part way through the essay, Sagan transitions to the spiritual aspect of the high, stating, "I do not consider myself a religious person in the usual sense, but there is a religious aspect to some highs."^{ci} By perceiving a communion with surroundings, the relationship of human beings to the universe and one another, and a "playful and whimsical awareness" of the absurd, Sagan is able to achieve a religious high.^{cii} Sagan's altered perception hints at the potentially mind-expanding or mind-enhancing aspects of the cannabis high and stands in opposition to Descartes' notion of the rational intellect. Through Sagan's account, we can begin to see how the mind altered by psychedelics is capable of looking beyond itself and to the realities that surround it. Sagan comments on this idea when he writes, "Cannabis brings us an awareness that we spend a lifetime being trained to overlook and forget and put out of our minds."^{ciii} The awareness Sagan mentions derives from far beyond the uber-rationality of Enlightened thought and

supplants the cognitive functions of the rational mind with the expanse of irrationality that lies in the forgotten realms of each mind. Thus, Sagan helps to elucidate how the cannabis high functions as a way to overlook how we have been trained to think and allows us to escape the constraints of the hegemonic dogmas of Enlightened reason by connecting us with matter and other forms of consciousness.

The nature of the cannabis-altered awareness, described by Sagan, is simultaneously vast and intricate with regards to spatial and temporal contexts. Sagan notes that while high, he is able to “penetrate into the past” in order to reconstruct memories that he perhaps only half-understood at the time.^{ciiv} Through his multiple experiences with cannabis, he notes that he is able to understand and enjoy music, art, food, and sex to a greater degree, and he also mentions how the high has allowed him to create insights that have contributed to his scientific discoveries and papers. All of these observations point to the expansive consciousness that manifests during the cannabis high. The reliance upon sensory expansion is in direct opposition to Descartes’ rational method in which Descartes states that, “because our senses sometimes deceive us, I wished to suppose that nothing is just as they cause us to imagine it to be.”^{cv} Instead of abiding by the mind’s eliminative capacities, or the utilitarian data we are immersed in, the cannabis-influenced mind finds new pathways that lead to unmediated experiences with the sensory stimuli that we derive from the physical world.

Near the conclusion of his essay, Sagan states that he is “convinced that there are genuine and valid levels of perception available with cannabis [...] which are, through the defects of our society and our educational system, unavailable to us without such drugs.”^{cvii} As a scholar, and thus a contributor to both our society and educational system,

Sagan's comment is particularly striking. Sagan points out the fault in systems of thought that have barricaded our brains from our physical surroundings. The systems, which include society and the educational system, have alienated us from nature by blinding the mind to the existence of nature as something that both surrounds and defines us. Instead, these systems place human rational thought as outside of, and specifically superior to, the other forms of consciousness that exist within the natural world. During his lifetime, Sagan was able to condense parts of the universe into the living rooms and minds of scientific and non-scientific individuals alike. He made ideas concerning the universe more tangible and understandable for the average individual. In this way, he was able to make the unfathomable fathomable and the unrecognizable recognizable, and it is no coincidence that he simultaneously cultivated such a strong relationship with the cannabis high.

Aldous Huxley, the British novelist and philosopher best known for his novel *Brave New World*, wrote *The Doors of Perception* in 1956. In *The Doors of Perception*, Huxley offers a perspective on certain aspects of the psychedelic high that challenge western conceptions of acceptable altered states of consciousness. Huxley's narrative provides a first-hand account of his psychedelic self-experiment after consuming a dose of mescaline (peyote). The narrative is much more than a plot-driven account and bridges into a philosophical analysis of the mind in relation to itself and nature.

Huxley begins his psychedelic experiment by describing the changing world around him as he begins to become high, noting that objective facts began to change while his subjective consciousness remained the same.^{cvi} For Huxley, colors become

more intense and spatial relationships lose their importance. Huxley describes this by noting, “Place and distance cease to be of much interest. The mind does its perceiving in terms of intensity and existence, profundity of significance, relationships within a pattern.”^{cviii} The described “intensity” and “profundity of significance” are illustrated when Huxley observes a vase holding a colorful bouquet of flowers. Huxley explains his attraction to the “lively dissonance” of the colors, which allows him to see “what Adam had seen on the morning of his creation—the miracle, moment by moment of naked existence.”^{cxix} Through Huxley’s account, we see how the psychedelic high has the potential to intersect with religion by creating a chemically induced religious experience.

Despite allusions to biblical imagery, the nature of the psychedelic religious experience is based upon perceptions of the inner consciousness rather than the external world. Huxley acknowledges this when he writes, “As a rule, the mescaline taker discovers an inner world as manifestly a datum, as self-evidently ‘infinite and holy,’ as that transfigured outer world which I had seen with my eyes open.”^{cx} Huxley’s words allow for a deeper understanding of the title of the work, *The Doors of Perception*, which is named in reference to William Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. In Plate 14 of his work, Blake writes, “If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, in-finite.”^{cxii} Laden with meaning, this line, on a simplistic level, tells the reader that the doors of perception have been clouded with severely limited methods of thought. The line breaks in the middle of the word “in-finite,” which functions as an invitation to unify the word as well as the “infinite” within each of us.^{cxiii}

Through the lens of Blake, Huxley’s mind alteration can be viewed as an example of “cleansing the doors of perception” and an attempt at unifying the infinite within the

self by creating an unmediated relationship between the mind and the physical world. In his narrative, the psychedelic high reconfigures Huxley's reality, and as a result, his mind grows more sensitive to its own workings and perceptions of consciousness. By taking mescaline, Huxley is able to perceive himself with an awareness of the nature of his own consciousness. To perceive oneself in such a way is in conflict with the hallmarks of western thought that exclude irrational cognitive functions. Huxley's self-investigation into the nature of his own consciousness is most strongly exemplified during the high when he assesses the room around him, noticing a small table, wicker chair, and desk. Instead of interpreting the objects in relation to space and photographic realism as he usually would, he looks upon the furniture "as the pure aesthete whose concern is only with forms and their relationships within the field of vision or the picture space."^{cxiii} He relates his vision to the eye of a Cubist painter and notes how the room's objects begin to shine with the "Inner Light" which allows each object to become "infinite in its significance."^{cxiv} Through these observations, Huxley is able to illustrate how his mind transforms from the all-consuming reality of the non-psychedelic mind, where a chair is simply a chair and a desk a desk, to the expansive mind where our definitions of even the most ordinary objects expand beyond the normal. Huxley goes on to say of the furniture, "I spent several minutes—or was it several centuries?—not merely gazing at those bamboo legs, but actually *being* them—or rather being myself in them."^{cxv} Through the psychedelic high, Huxley's reality is altered to a point where he can gaze at the furniture and sense his consciousness extending beyond himself and into his surroundings. He is able to self-identify with the non-human "other." In Huxley's words, this means that he is able to be a "Not-self in the Not-self which was the chair."^{cxvi} The mention of the "Not-

self” indicates the departure of the Cartesian intellect from consciousness. Through the psychedelic high, Huxley’s reality is no longer *his* reality but an existence that subsists beyond him and the objects that he is surrounded by. The term “Not-self” thus removes the subjective egocentric mind from reality so that meaning and the definition of consciousness is not determined by one entity.

Huxley connects the idea of the egoless consciousness, or non-rational mind, to a discussion concerning the philosophy of the mind in which he argues, using the philosophy of English scholar Charlie Dunbar Broad (C.D. Broad), that humans are capable of experiencing more than a single perceived reality. Huxley refers to a section from Broad’s essay, “The Relevance of Psychological Research to Philosophy,” in which the philosopher states:

The suggestion is that the function of the brain and nervous system and sense-organs is in the main eliminative and not productive. Each person is at each moment potentially capable of remembering all that has ever happened to him and of perceiving everything that is happening anywhere in the universe. The function of the brain and nervous system is to protect us from being overwhelmed and confused by this mass of largely useless and irrelevant knowledge, by shutting out most of what we should otherwise perceive or remember at any moment, and leaving only that very small and special selection which is likely to be practically useful.^{cxvii}

Huxley offers a name for the supposed ability of the mind to remember all that has happened and to perceive everything in the universe: Mind at Large. Although we are all capable of being Mind at Large at any given moment, we are unable to do so because of the mind’s linear focus on survival, or what is “practically useful” in Broad’s terms. The eliminative mind comes into existence as the Mind at Large is reduced to a smaller set of sensory data that allows us to avoid becoming overwhelmed by the potential of our own consciousness. Huxley argues that human language was formed as a way to

communicate our reduced awareness through the eliminative mind.^{cxviii} Our linguistic shortcoming implies that we do not presently have a language or mode of expression for the Mind at Large, and we are thus bound to the eliminative mind in part by the human linguistic tradition. Huxley and Broad note that most people are only aware of consciousness within the constraints of the utilitarian and eliminative mind, which is then reinforced by language. However, some people are able to acquire “by-passes” of the eliminative mind, thus experiencing elements of the productive Mind at Large, through “deliberate ‘spiritual exercises,’ or through hypnosis, or by means of drugs.”^{cxix} Such experiences do not cause one to move beyond the eliminative mind completely, but rather allow for “something more than, and above all something different from, the carefully selected utilitarian material which our narrowed [...] minds regard as a complete, or at least sufficient, picture of reality.”^{cxx}

If the psychedelic mind is capable of experiencing some of the sentiments that are derived from Mind at Large, it is now easier to understand why it is so difficult for most people to describe the high in words. When this idea is placed within the gaze of Blake’s doors of perception, we can begin to see what must be cleansed in order to catch a glimpse of what lies beyond the threshold of the eliminative consciousness. In order to cleanse the doors, using Huxley and Broad’s logic, the rational intellect must be suspended outside of consciousness in order to open the doors of the mind to other significances beyond one’s own. By cleansing the doors of perception, the human mind gains clarity of consciousness outside of the patterns we have been taught to follow through mindsets of induction, reduction, and empiricism. Blake, Broad, and Huxley allow us to understand that if we scrape the dust from the windows of the mind, we might

see something very different—something that is in the light of mysticism or religious consciousness, or hallucination. But, while the rational mind classifies these entities as “unreal,” the non-rational mind sees mysticism, religious consciousness, and hallucinations as genuine. The non-rational mind allows us to step outside of western logical positivistic consciousness to experience new realms of reality that are very “real” indeed.

Huxley concludes *The Doors of Perception* by writing:

But the man who comes back through the Door in the Wall will never be quite the same as the man who went out. He will be wiser but less cocksure, happier but less self-satisfied, humbler in acknowledging his ignorance yet better equipped to understand the relationship of words to things, of systematic reasoning to the unfathomable Mystery which it tries, forever vainly, to comprehend.^{CXXI}

If, according to Broad and Huxley, each individual is capable of experiencing multiple realities at one time, then perhaps part of the fear of the psychedelic, and the specific cannabis, high is not due to political and racial terror, but rather to a terror of our own consciousness. If our perceptions construct the reality we experience, and if we cannot trust our own perceptions to reflect a reality that we can recognize, how can we trust anything to be truth?

By giving the intellect full agency over rationality and thought, Descartes rationalized the existence of a divine entity, or God. Some argue that the demise of God can be attributed to Descartes’ *cogito*, as it led to a dismissal of faith by way of reason. The *cogito* functions as a way to “prove” the existence of God in the same way that Descartes sought to prove the singularity of the intellect. Through Descartes’ privileging of rationality, God can only be proved through a reliance on the intellect rather than

“irrational” faith. Moreover, the Cartesian God can only be affirmed through a reliance on the intellect, which thus leads to an ultimate privileging of the eliminative rational mind. Yet the same reliance on rationality can also disprove God, which continues to exclude notions of faith. The *cogito* does not leave room for spiritual intuition nor any reality that exists beyond the intellect, and faith is thus replaced with logic. The vaunted rational intellect of the West thus excludes paths to the divine through faith and removes the psychic validity of the non-human other, or nature.

While it is unclear as to what specifically constitutes “the unfathomable Mystery” in Huxley’s final statement, perhaps it is the divine mystery of the existence and disposition of one’s own consciousness. If this is the case, then it can be concluded that the eliminative mind has restricted our fears to the narrowed reality we experience each day. Through this narrowed reality, we have misplaced our fears of the psychedelic high. Instead of looking within, at our own eliminative consciousnesses and the potential we hold to perceive beyond it, we look outwards and cultivate blame through racial stigmas and political propaganda in order to otherize our own internal terrors. As seen in the history and debates surrounding cannabis, the othering of the substance is not passive or benign but deeply aggressive to a point where whole societies and governments have orchestrated legislation, rhetoric, and attitudes to chastise and alienate the use and the users of psychedelics.

Psychedelics open the door to experiencing what it would be like to have Mind-at-Large, or what it would be like to have a consciousness that functions as a hall of mirrors. Such a consciousness exists outside of the current standing definition of thought and has the potential to form a direct and unmediated relationship between man, God, and

the natural world. If, according to Broad, the eliminative mind works out of biological necessity so as to not overwhelm us, then the obverse productive mind would perhaps be overwhelming with the stimuli of realities beyond our own. In this way, the terror associated with psychedelics is akin to a fear of knowledge itself, which is derived from the epistemological terror brought to us by the Mind at Large. But in this case, knowledge is not temporal or spatial, but exists in the ether of the mind, which is perhaps the most foreign entity of all. The terror surrounding the psychedelic high is at once a terror centered in our own eliminative and productive consciousnesses and functions as a mode of expression for the fear of what it would be like to de-center our minds so much that we would have the potential to come into communion with the physical world. The western intellect, conditioned to worship its own narrow self-reflection, finds terror in the expansion of knowledge toward the “other,” or the non-egocentric world. The non-egocentric world, that the mind comes to know through an expansion of consciousness, is nature.

IX. Concluding Remarks

Plate 14 of William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, where the cleansing of the doors of perception is mentioned, depicts a male corpse lying on its back as flames consume the surrounding frame. Above the corpse and amidst the flames, a man flies with his arms outstretched towards the reader. Viewed alongside the text, the corpse represents man as Blake sees him: bereft of life through the myth that "the body has been expunged from the soul."^{cxixii} Blake uses an apocalyptic narrative to write that there will be a consuming of creation that will result in the infinite and holy, rather than what exists now: the "finite and corrupt."^{cxixiii} Here, Blake refers to an apocalypse of the imagination—that there is a moment of insight available for all humans to see what really *is*, rather than what we have been told to believe is true by institutional religion, rationality, and empiricism.

For Blake, the corpse-like existence that humans lead is due to the institutional and empirical belief that the body and soul exist separately. He articulates this when he writes, "For man has closed himself up."^{cxixiv} The closing is a result of removing ourselves from nature through rationality, which leads to a closing of the potential to cultivate a relationship with the infinite. By unifying the in-finite that Blake believes to exist within each of us, we simultaneously merge with the universe that exists both within and beyond ourselves—we become part of the story. The beliefs that have "closed [man]

up” are expressed through the material and empirical belief that matter derives from mind. Instead, Blake holds that nature *is* us, and that whatever exists is not solely a function of what the mind brings to it. Blake’s idea is represented by the image of the man above the corpse, who flies towards the reader in a moment of connection between body and mind. The connection between body and mind is contrary to western dogmatic beliefs and, in particular, leads Blake to argue that rationality and institutional religion have convinced us to believe that God is a provable entity, when in actuality, we too are God, we are our own creators.

...

Rational thought and empiricism have afforded us a multitude of new understandings, but it seems that we have lost something too. The loss is evident in the dialogues surrounding the use of drugs, which tend to focus on the minutia of scientific fact and cultural stigmas. Rather than looking for inclusions and connections between cannabis and society, we have learned instead to create distance by focusing on racial associations, legislation, and scientific perspectives. As a result, cannabis is primarily viewed as foreign and dangerous, and we lack a language to aptly describe its effects. In other words, cannabis exists outside of us in that it is rarely described through its effects on consciousness and the mind.

In my research, I have found that the dialogues pertaining to cannabis are only advancing through medicinal and sociological pathways. The philosophical, and specifically epistemological, discussions are severely lacking. Narratives such as Sagan’s “Mr. X” and Huxley’s *The Doors of Perception* come close to describing the felt

experience of the high but exist on the periphery of the discussion. I have not found texts that bridge the gap between the cannabis high and philosophical discussions pertaining to altered states of consciousness. Thus, while we may have a stronger understanding of the chemical reactions that occur between the brain and cannabis or the social taboos associated with the substance, our understanding is stunted when it comes to the recognition of the nature of the mind. The taboos discussed within this essay are much to blame for the lack of understanding of cannabis, but also reveal the need for an influx of discussion concerning the high's influence on the mind. Until the fear of cannabis gains a broader and deeper understanding, the drug will continue to face prohibition and its criminal implications will stunt the lives of numerous citizens. More pertinent, however, is that we have a deep lack of understanding of ourselves as evidenced by the absence of discussion and understanding of the substance. It is necessary to fill this gap so that humans can add to our search for meaning again.

While it would be easy to end by stating that the cannabis high is important for its potential to push us towards an elevated and unexplored potential within the mind, this rhetoric is ironic to the discussion presented in this essay. The implications of the cannabis high are entirely separate from, and in opposition to, notions of progress and productivity. Instead, the consciousness that is unveiled through the cannabis high leads us back to an existence that we have forgotten. We have become alienated from ourselves, or our primitive consciousness, and have defined ourselves through our ability to innovate and progress through rational thought. The productive modes of thought that are available through the cannabis high have the potential to reconnect us with *meaning*.

In this world of momentum and potential, we are lost, and cannabis has the potential to reconnect us with the infinite.

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