

Embodying Forbidden Cannabinated States

Geographers and political ecologists of health and well-being, in their pursuit of a richer and more contextualized understanding of health, must be willing and able to address embodied experiences of ecstasy, pleasure, and relief, as well as the impact that such lived experiences have on general health, well-being, and happiness. Similarly, geographers and political ecologists of pain, violence and oppression, in seeking to describe microgeographies of structural violence and suffering, must be willing and able to take careful notice of embodied experiences of fear and suffering that arise as a consequence of living as a disciplined and punishable subject within 21st century regimes of governmentality, wherein technocratic and biopolitical tactics are employed to forcefully restrict and prohibit the material conditions underpinning some of these embodied experiences of pleasure/ecstasy/relief—under the banner of public health promotion. In this essay, I seek to contribute to the greater understanding of embodied experiences of pleasure and relief, and of fear and suffering, as they relate to political ecologies of well-being and structural violence. In particular, I will focus on the pleasure/relief experienced in the embodiment of cannabinated states, which arise metabolically and pharmacologically as a result of cannabis flower consumption, and on the fear/suffering embodied when individual cannabis consumption geographies articulate with the modern, global public health disciplinary regimes of Cannabis Abuse mental disorder prevention and control (prohibition). In this way, a better understanding

of health and violence political ecologies can be reached, just as previous embodiment perspectives in gay and lesbian and disability geographies have added to our understandings of health and oppression (Brown 2000; Valentine 2000, 2005).

Whether inquiring into human experiences of ecstasy/pleasure/relief or those of fear/suffering, perspectives from inquiry oriented along the lines of embodiment and phenomenology are indispensable. This is for the simple fact that these lived experiences are deeply subjective and deeply personal in nature—phenomena that a rich literature in embodiment over the last forty years has made great strides in carefully representing (Nast and Pile 1998). As pleasure/relief and fear/suffering arise in the inner sanctum of one's being (bodily innerspace), an embodiment line of inquiry must naturally begin with a phenomenology of one's own lived experiences, by which a representation of embodied experience can be articulated. For, as Merleau-Ponty pointedly admits, "I cannot understand the function of the living body except by enacting it myself, and except in so far as I am a body which rises toward the world" (1962: 75, quoted in Weiss 1999). Paying close attention to my own memories of embodied experiences of, in this case, cannabinated pleasure/relief and anti-cannabis-policing-generated fear, and seeking to articulate a representation of these experiences, will allow for a richer understanding of the experience of others, especially those who share similar cultural and biophysical environments with me. In adopting such an approach, I am taking as a model the work of several scholars who have contributed to the recently published collection *Emotional Geographies* (2005), edited by Joyce Davidson, Liz Bondi, and Mick Smith. In particular, I draw from the editors' introductory chapter "Geography's 'Emotional Turn'", Owain Jones' piece entitled "An Ecology of Emotion, Memory, Self, and

Landscape” and Mick Smith’s piece entitled “On ‘Being’ Moved by Nature: Geography, Emotion, and Environmental Ethics.” These pieces all underscore the importance of emotions and feelings in geographic research and further note the importance of emotive recollection of memories tied to places and close encounters with nature. Thus, I shall begin with myself—my own descriptions of my experiences—as I attempt the sketch the contours of a political ecology of health and violence approach to the embodied experiences of cannabinated states and their policing.

First, some historic and geographic background. Across cultures and throughout human history, human beings have known about organisms living in their natural environments that, when consumed or ingested in whole or in part, could move the mind and alter perception. In 21st century medicine and law, many of these living organisms, be they plants or fungi, along with the unique chemicals they produce and their related congeners, have become the locus of intense political focus by powerful and violent state institutions and apparati around the world. Many of those who use these politicized plants, fungi, and chemicals are vigorously pursued by law enforcement and punished by criminal justice systems using methods and tactics that increasingly undermine human dignity. The ultimate stated purpose of the entire medico-legal apparatus against these so-called “controlled substances” derives its final justification from a claim to act towards the ‘prevention and control’ of ‘drug abuse’ by individuals. In other words, the final downstream target of this entire enforcement schema has to do with particular situations in which human bodies make close contact with one of these politicized plants, fungi, or chemicals, and the ensuing embodied experiences that follows as a result of the body’s

absorption of active chemicals into its bloodstream. Do these experiences amount to 'drug' or 'Substance' Abuse?

Unfortunately, current medical thinking on Substance Abuse has acquiesced to what I would call "drug war diagnostics." Codified, canonical diagnostic criteria (found in the *DSM-IV-TR* (2000)) that health care providers use to diagnose patients with Substance Abuse mental disorders related to their consumption of 'controlled substance'(s) require providers to take careful notice, ideally (but often not) in the course of a structured interview, of "clinically significant...distress" in the patients they are evaluating for a particular Substance Abuse mental disorder. Unabashedly, the *DSM-IV-TR* states that this "distress" can be "manifested by...recurrent substance-related **legal** problems" which have "occurred repeatedly" or "been persistent" in the past year (emphasis added). Though this is not the only criterion used in the diagnosis of "substance-related" mental disorders, for the purposes I am interested in, it is the one of *greatest* concern. Moreover, it alone is sufficient (pathognomonic) to clinch a diagnosis of Substance Abuse mental disorder. As the *DSM-IV* explicitly points out, in the case of Cannabis Abuse mental disorder (diagnostic code 305.20), cannabis-related legal problems that the clinician should take into consideration include those "that may occur as a consequence of arrests for cannabis possession." In other words, noting clinically significant distress in a patient that may occur as a consequence of 'their' legal problems stemming from a cannabis possession arrest is sufficient grounds to diagnose the patient with an Abuse mental disorder(!). It should be noted that there is no other defined mental illness in all of psychiatry whose diagnosis so significantly relies on the existence of patients' legal problems for evaluation.

What is readily apparent from a ‘political ecology of health and disease’ and a radical medical geography perspective is that before such a Cannabis Abuse mental disorder diagnosis can be made, patient-centered medical care demands scrutiny of the political context for patients’ “cannabis-related problem[s]”. This would entail ethically interrogating the basis of the “legal” aspects of patients’ problems, as well as seeking to uncover “hidden agendas” that may be at work (Mayer 1996). This is especially warranted when the laws that have apparently been transgressed by patients are ones that purport to prevent and control, at the population level, the very mental disorder which is being considered for diagnosis. I would argue that the success or failure of a so-called public health regulation like a Cannabis Abuse prevention and control law as it applies to a particular patient, i.e., whether or not he or she has distressfully transgressed the regulation, ought not to be the grounds on which a mental disorder diagnosis is made. Rather, the diagnosis of Cannabis Abuse mental disorder should be made based on whether or not the individual patient does indeed engage in problematic cannabis consumption practices. Just because the Cannabis Abuse prevention and control law, a (supposed) public health measure, has been flouted—with distressing consequences for the patient—does not mean that this is a sure sign that mental disorder is present in the patient. After all, how a patient’s consumption practices came to articulate spatio-temporally with the public health regime of Cannabis Abuse disorder prevention and control to generate ‘their’ “legal problems” is not simply a function of a patient’s mental health. Depending on the effectiveness and sincerity of the public health regulation, regulatory transgressions may not be a sign of mental disorder, but rather one of *governmental* disorder. This possibility must be sincerely entertained. An embodiment

line of inquiry towards cannabinated states can help to address this, and it can also help to honestly answer the following question: is there any other medical explanation other than underlying Cannabis Abuse mental disorder that would explain why some engage in cannabis consumption that leads to legal problems or has a high potential of doing so? I believe the answer is ‘yes.’

In order to address such critical questions regarding health and structural violence, we must begin to understand—at the embodied level—the pleasure/relief associated with cannabis consumption and the distress/fear associated with its policing. To this end, I offer the following recollections of my own embodied experiences with cannabinated states. To contextualize these recollections, I should state that I first smoked (or more precisely, consumed, by inhalation, the fumes produced by combustion of) the flowers of a cannabis plant on November 11, 1999 in Berkeley, California. After that experience and several other subsequent exposures to the resinous exudates of cannabis flowers, I concluded that induction of temporary cannabinated states was overall highly beneficial for my psyche. I found that cannabinated states of consciousness were pleasurable, intellectually and spiritually stimulating, and helpful for giving me a fresh perspective on my ordinary state of consciousness—an opportunity for self-reflection. Therapeutically, I found that cannabinated states eased the social anxiety that sometimes took hold of me, and that cannabis consumption was able to ease bodily aches and pains, as would be expected with the actions of cannabinoids on my own embodied endocannabinoid system. As a preventative health measure, I also found myself consuming less alcohol as a result of my choice for cannabis consumption and enjoying the bodily practices of stretching, exercise, yoga, and meditation. Cannabinated states allowed me to heighten

the awareness (or intensity) of my sense-perceptions. In these states, music that vibrated my auditory hair cells was more vividly appreciated. Touch and taste were enhanced. The very fact of my embodied being became astonishingly apparent! I could appreciate the experience of being a living, breathing body present in the moment. Embodying cannabinated states improved the overall quality of my life, health-related and otherwise, and helped me to live a richer, more aware life. The states were often accompanied with an improved sense of well-being and peace.

But, having been raised an 'Okie from Muskogee' (see 'Appendix'), where cannabis consumption is generally intolerable, I was (and continue to be) aware that embodying cannabinated states was (and is) strictly forbidden. I have experienced fear as a result of simply living within the global regime of Cannabis Abuse disorder prevention, because this regime is by and large one of zero-tolerance Cannabis Prohibition. This heavily financed and 'hidden agenda'- laden policy routinely punishes those who simply possess cannabis, with roughly 770,000 cannabis-related arrests annually (1 every 45 seconds) and with approximately 30,000 current cannabis prisoners currently being held in America (whose cannabis "crimes" are the most serious or controlling offences) (King and Mauer 2006). Many are serving very long sentences. In fact, the death penalty is a perfectly allowable sentence for some cannabis "crimes" in the United States, but it has not been explicitly used in this way yet. Other countries like Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines, Qatar, China, however, do execute for these crimes. In total, ~26 million cannabis arrests have occurred globally since statistics began being compiled in 1961, and roughly 17 million have occurred in the United States. In such an

environment, to be bodily disciplined with notions such as ‘total surveillance’ and ‘zero-tolerance’ is frightening indeed.

It is also cause for indignation.

Here are the words from a flyer distributed by the Cannabis Consumers Campaign (www.cannabisconsumers.org/equalrights.php), that express this indignation well:

Equal Rights Are For Everybody! Cannabis consumers are not second class citizens. All adults have the right to consume alcohol, tobacco and other legal drugs; but they are criminalized if they choose cannabis (pot, marijuana), a natural herb. That is neither fair nor reasonable. When arbitrary laws target and deprive people of their freedom, jobs, children, homes, drivers’ licenses, educational benefits, opportunities and other human and civil rights, that is discrimination. When propaganda campaigns attack their character and reputation, that is bigotry. People should be judged by their actions, not by their urine.

This is not a matter of special privilege, but one of equal rights. Equal protection before the law is guaranteed by the US Constitution and international law.

Cannabis consumers, you deserve to be treated fairly. Come out of the closet and stand up for your equal rights: "Liberty and justice for all."

The discriminatory ban on adult cannabis use must be ended now. Get involved: Contact us. Join the campaign. We can help you come out and take a stand. Discrimination Is Wrong. Equal Rights for Cannabis Consumers.

On the back of the flyer, the reader is reminded that whereas

people who consume alcohol or tobacco...can use and possess [it] in private or often in public without fear of arrest as long as they use it responsibly (and are not minors)...people who smoke [sic] or grow cannabis...Are subject to criminal penalties, fines, possible arrest, prosecution anywhere, and can be sent to prison for simple possession, regardless of age or responsible use.

Thus, the emotions I have embodied as a result of living as a disciplined and punishable subject under this global regime of Cannabis Abuse Disorder prevention and control are ones of occasional fear mixed in with feelings of indignation and discrimination. I have been a target of a harassment episode where the threat of exposing my past cannabis consumption practices to law enforcement and other authority figures was used to

terrorize me. I have feared arrest, feared losing funding, feared being disqualified for professional licensure or being expelled from professional training school, and feared for my loved ones being caught in harm's way for my actions. Not knowing whom or how much to trust someone is also an emotional issue, given the extensive use of informants in "drug law enforcement."

This long existing disciplinary regime on my body, which first started with early school "education" programs and continues to the present, has been emphasized and exemplified by my period encounters with those whose bodies were hunted and captured by law enforcement officials at the community/county/state/federal level for their cannabis-related activities. I have met people living with serious illnesses (rheumatoid arthritis, failed-back surgeries, cancers, chronic pain) whose bodies have been terrorized and tortured when they were incarcerated and denied access to therapeutic and palliative cannabis consumption—not to mention basic, dignified and humane treatment. I have met people who are facing or have faced life sentences for their cannabis cultivation practices—even when that cannabis was being used for medical purposes. There are many more cases I have simply read about or learned about from trusted sources; several are no longer alive as a result of this draconian enforcement.

In sharp relief to this, I have also met people who have complete amnesty and sanctuary from prosecution related to their cannabis consumption or production practices. I have met the grower who produces cannabis for the American federal government and profits from its prohibition by selling a therapeutically inferior synthetic cannabinoid; ill and disabled Americans (five remaining...I have met three) who, as a result of a landmark lawsuit, are supplied cannabis to consume by the federal government because

their physicians attested to its profound therapeutic value for them. I have also met chronically ill patients in Canada who have amnesty from the Canadian government to produce and consume cannabis. Finally, I have met individuals in various cannabis cafes in Vancouver, British Columbia and Amsterdam, Holland who breathe a deep sigh of relief as they come to fully inhabit the safe spaces that grant them a sanctuary for cannabis consumption.

Right now, approximately ~161 million people around the world who consume cannabis (a UN underestimate) do not have basic human rights under the law and therefore likely often embody distress and fear. Many billions more who could benefit from cannabis for food, fuel, medicine, or preventative measure are denied safe access. At the same time, I know that the prohibition of cannabis is a complete sham that was perpetuated with racist and alarmist propaganda, likely, in order to undercut the full industrial application of cannabis-biomass energy and cellulose and to grow the enforcement power of the federal government. In the course of writing this essay on the embodiment of these forbidden cannabinated states, I have come to understand that there are those who have become so thoroughly convinced or “brain-polluted” by the long-enduring propaganda and underhanded tactics of cannabis prohibition beneficiaries that they likely embody feelings of sickness, revulsion, and disgust upon hearing about or seeing the word “MARIJUANA.” I believe that healing this sickness and “DOPE” hysteria is of vital importance. If only those who are so sickened and/or inwardly frightened by “MARIJUANA” and “MARIJUNA SMOKERS” such that they celebrate the zero-tolerance (i.e., intolerant), draconian war against the plant’s advocates, consumers and producers—perhaps because it helps them achieve a transient sense of

safety—could witness and explore the geographies of a loosened noose of prohibition on *cannabis sativa L.* In such therapeutic landscapes, they might be able to calm their hysteria and discover cannabis’s full healing potential, for humankind and the planetary ecosystem.

Appendix:

Lyrics for Merle Haggard’s 1967 hit song, “Okie From Muskogee”, the quintessential counter-counter cultural song:

We don't smoke marijuana in Muskogee;
An' we don't take our trips on LSD.
We don't burn no draft cards down on Main Street;
We like livin' right, an' bein' free.

We don't make no party out of lovin';
We like holdin' hands and pitchin' woo;
We don't let our hair grow long and shaggy,
Like the hippies out in San Francisco do.

And I'm proud to be an Okie from Muskogee,
A place where even squares can have a ball.
We still wave 'Old Glory' down at the courthouse,
And white lightnin's still the biggest thrill of all.

Hey, leather boots are still in style for manly footwear;
Beads and Roman sandals won't be seen.
An' football's still the roughest thing on campus,
And the kids there still respect the college dean.

And I'm proud to be an Okie from Muskogee,
A place where even squares can have a ball.
We still wave 'Old Glory' down at the courthouse,
And white lightnin's still the biggest thrill of all.

And white lightnin's still the biggest thrill of all,
In Muskogee, Oklahoma, USA.

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