“The Kids Are All-(W)ite”: A Discussion of Drug Prohibition and Criminalization Policies in British North America as a Tool of White Supremacy

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The colonization of the Western world by European powers was driven largely through the desire to create a society divided between the socially acceptable “British-like” population, and the dangerous “non-British other”. The enacting of laws such as the Indian Act, Chinese Immigration Act, and Jim Crowe Laws were based upon beliefs of biological differences between the white and non-white races, solved only through assimilation and subordination policies. Many of these understandings have followed into modern society, leaching into daily behaviours and government practices. The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, racial eugenics, and discriminatory immigration laws have now been recognized as racially motivated, and largely been abolished and reversed, yet seemingly acceptable tropes are still largely rooted in these portrayals. The criminalization of Class A and B drugs across the Northern American region has been widely regarded as a way to protect the health and safety of the general public, as well as dissuade the illegal drug trade. However strong such evidence is for the importance of health and safety, these criminalization laws are built upon the fractured idea that drug use is only threatening when used by non-white bodies. Prior to colonization, cocaine, cannabis, and opium use were widely accepted and promoted across Europe and Turtle Island, as well as holding cultural importance in many African cultures. It was not until the 19th century that British settlers began recognizing that the drugs they consumed daily were also being used by the ‘savage’, dangerous peoples within their lands. In order to establish the idea of British superiority and order, they began to ban these substances, portraying them as gateways to corruption and disarray. Over the course of three decades, Canada and the United States passed a series of drug classification and prohibition laws, publicized as concerns over public health and safety. However, up until the 20th century, the use and cultivation of cocaine, opium, and cannabis were staples in the economic development, medical advancements, and social culture of British North

America. It was only through changing patterns of non-white immigration that these substances were attributed to destitute behaviours and anti-British cultures.

In 1859, German chemist Albert Niemann learned about a phenomena amongst Native Peruvian tribes that had crossed paths with Spanish explorers. By chewing on a coca leaf, one would experience an almost euphoric sensation, coupled with an elated mood and localized numbing effect. Niemann was able to successfully extract cocaine hydrochloride from coca leaves, and found that the effects from the isolated samples were much stronger and lasted longer in comparison to the entire leaf.[1] By the 1880s, cocaine emerged as both a medicinal staple and party favour, for those who could afford it. Used to treat morphine addiction in Civil War veterans, a localised anesthetic agent for respiratory and spinal procedures, cocaine quickly adapted into everyday use and consumption.[2] In 1886, John Stith Pemberton announced that his new soft-drink company, Coca-Cola, would contain minute amounts of cocaine, to produce an exhilarating experience for his consumers. Cigarettes, wine, and even food products all included cocaine (in varying amounts) as a key ingredient, and the absence of regulation allowed these products to sell easily, and be consumed even easier.[3] By the start of the 20th century, cocaine use and addiction affected over 3 million Americans, majority of which were upper- and middle-class white women. At the same time that cocaine was gaining fame as a 'super cure', the United States and Canada were experiencing the abolition of slavery and introduction of segration policies. As Black men and women began to enter society as equals, white Americans -

[1] David Sklanksy, "Cocaine, Race, and Equal Protection ", *Stanford Law Review,* July 1995. Accessed March 11, 2022. Available from JSTOR

[2] Erick Trickey, *Inside the Story of America's 19th Century Opiate Addiction,* 2018 (accessed March 8, 2022); available from https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/inside-story-americas-19th-century-opiate-addiction-180967673/

[3] David Musto, "Opium, Cocaine and Marijuana in American History", *Scientific American,* July 1991. Accessed March 8, 2022. Available from JSTOR.

most of whom still felt they were genetically and morally superior - looked for ways to continue the dehumanization and criminalization of freedmen. The idea of the 'black buck' and 'jezebel' were used to portray Black men and women as predatory, violent beings determined to ravage the innocence of white women and children. The rise in violent crimes was blamed on Black men, and the media began spinning the idea that freedmen coming North were fifteen times more likely to consume cocaine as their white counterparts.[4] Wild tales of Black men high on cocaine unfaltered by gunshots, and Black women so addicted to drugs they could never be mothers held front-page spots in newspapers and political interviews, all while ignoring the vast demographic gap between white and non-white cocaine users.[5] In 1914, the USA passed the Harrison Narcotics Act, criminalizing the distribution and consumption of cocaine across the country. This came shortly after the 1900 Journal of American Medicine Association publication stating that cocaine use in Black males was scientifically linked to physical and sexual violence, and warned of a "Negro Cocaine Fiend" epidemic if changes were not made soon.[6]

Across the border, Canada was experiencing similar trends, with cocaine being one of the most accessible products across the region. The influx of Chinese railroad workers in British Columbia in the mid- to late-1800s brought forward severe anti-Asian attitudes and race riots, as well as anti-Black and anti-Indigenous beliefs. The use of cocaine - amongst other drugs - mirrored US opinions and began taking shape as an issue of Canadian "others", mainly amongst the Chinese and Black communities. In 1907, Canadian Prime Minister Wilfred Laurier and his deputy minister Mackenzie King travelled to Vancouver, BC to investigate claims of

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[4] ACLU, *Against Drug Prohibition,* 2022 (accessed March 11, 2022); available from https://www.aclu.org/other/against-drug-prohibition

[5] David Sklanksy, "Cocaine, Race, and Equal Protection ", *Stanford Law Review,* July 1995. Accessed March 11, 2022. Available from JSTOR

[6] (Musto, 1991)

drug-addicted “others”. Laurier soon passed the 1908 Opium Act, and an amendment in 1911 included the prohibition of cocaine and harsher penalties for those convicted.[7]

40 years before North America witnessed the explosion of cocaine addiction, British military forces successfully invaded China, securing the rights to cultivate and export opium to its Western trading partners. Opium was not new for the West, nor had it escaped the clutches of upper- and middle-class addictions.[8] Brought overseas by British smugglers, the consumption of opium in North America peaked in the 1840s, with middle-aged white women making up over 60% of all recorded users.[9] As the opium fad began to fade, both Canada and the United States saw a wave of Chinese immigration in their coastal regions to aid in railroad construction projects. The exploitative working conditions in China, coupled with crop failures and an overall lack of accessible food within the country pushed young, Chinese men to emigrate, many of whom found work in the United States. Compared to back home, labour in America was much less excruciating, and laws surrounding employment allowed for Chinese workers to be paid much lower than their American counterparts. Not only did the ability to hire a greater quantity of workers for cheaper wages lead to ripples of unemployment amongst white communities, they viewed Chinese immigrants as backward, savage peoples, who could only enjoy the benefits of cheap, grueling labour if they were biologically subordinate.[10]

At one point, China herself grappled with opium addiction throughout its population, curbed in 1729 by emperor Yongzheng’s decree banning its import and sale. Though this did not

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[7] Canadian Drug Policy Coalition, *Drug Policy and Racism,* 2022 (accessed March 11, 2022); available from https://www.drugpolicy.ca/about/racism/

[8] Jacques Downs, “American Merchants and the China Opium Trade, 1800-1840”, *The Business History Review,* 1968. Accessed March 18, 2022. Available from JSTOR.

[9] (Trickey, 2018)

[10] *Chinese Immigration and Chinese Exclusion Acts* (accessed March 20, 2022); available from https://history.state.gov/milestones/1866-1898/chinese-immigration

eliminate opium addiction, it helped slow the spread until the mid 19th century, when China's opium control was seized by the British East India Trading Company.[11] As immigrants began arriving in North America, they brought with them their opium habits, further fuelling discrimination and hatred towards China.

In 1895, U.S President William McKinley received a painting, depicting the innocence of Europe - and her colonies - facing the possibility of war against the bruteish Chinese. This 'Yellow Peril" took root in almost every area of North American media, with falsified stories of violence, pilferage, and savagery. Since it was a common practice for Chinese immigrants to live in shared housing accommodations - many of which were poorly built - politicians and white elitists across North America began painting these as opium dens, claiming to have discovered young white women cowering within, covered in filth and opium residue. The cultural practices of communal living and playing alien card games brought over by Chinese immigrants were seen as the manifestations of prostitution and gambling, two vices that threatened North America's orderly, Protestant way of life. As with cocaine, both the American and Canadian governments responded and fuelled the idea of drug-crazed "others", passing restrictive laws on the use of opium.[12]

Although the US's 1914 Harrison Narcotics Act completely prohibited the import, sale, and use of opium for the general public, Canada's 1908 Opium Act was much more racially charged. It only regulated the import and sale of opium in the country, directly targeting manufacturers while remaining lenient to their customers. Opium dens within Western Canada's Chinese neighbourhoods were the Act's primary targets, blamed as the cause of the increasing

[11] Asia Pacific Curriculum, *The Opium Wars in China* (accessed March 20, 2022); available from https://asiapacificcurriculum.ca/learning-module/opium-wars-china

[12] Stanford Lyman, "The Yellow Peril Mystique: Origins and Vicissitudes of a Racist Discourse", *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society,* 2000. Accessed March 13, 2022. Available from JSTOR.

numbers of addiction and substance abuse amongst white populations. The importing and profiting of opium sales in both Canada and the US were seen to be Chinese issues, and legislative bodies maintained a blind-eye to the data indicating otherwise. The majority of opium addicts in North America were middle- to upper-class white folks, forced to buy from Chinese dens. The concept of a white individual selling drugs outside of a medical setting was frowned upon, seen as dirty and vile. Yet, the spread of opium into the West was directly caused by British influence and Western desires to boost economies, regardless of the cost.[13]

By the early 20th century, North America had experienced - and largely reacted - to the cocaine and opium addictions of its people, barr authorization by healthcare professionals. Free Black folks and Chinese immigrants were considered public enemy no.1, threatening to corrupt the perfect sons and daughters of the West's white Pentacostal society. In 1917, the Mexican Revolution had come to an end, and many citizens began enjoying new freedoms and abilities to travel northward to the United States. Waves of Mexican immigration to the American border states brought with them growing racial tensions, especially in regions that had large Black or Chinese communities. In similar attitudes, white neighbourhoods and pro-segregation politicians disapproved of the changing demographics, and looked for ways to discourage it.[14]

In 1930, Henry Aslinger was appointed as the first Director of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, and brought into the role his staunch support of prohibition. The sale and consumption of alcohol had been outlawed just ten years prior, and cocaine and opium addictions were issues of the past, so Aslinger turned his attention elsewhere, toward cannabis. Akin to opium and

[13] Stephanie Ng, "Opium Use in 19th Century Britain: The Roots of Moralism in Shaping Drug Legislation", *American Journal of Psychiatry,* 2017. Accessed March 11, 2022. Available from https://psychiatryonline.org/doi/10.1176/appi.ajp-rj.2016.110606

[14] (Musto, 1991)

cocaine, doctors had used cannabis to treat a wide variety of afflictions and illnesses, and was marketed as a way to enjoy life without the dangers associated with opioids. However, it was also a dominant aspect of Mexican Indigenous culture, used both in ceremonial contexts and in daily social life. Aslinger capitalized on this, and enlisted tactics similar to those used to paint Black men as cocaine fiends, and Chinese immigrants as opium threats. He began promoting the idea of a new, dangerous drug that could send even the most passive into fits of violent psychosis and Satanic worship. "Marijuana", as he referred to it, was identical to traditional cannabis in every sense, except for its direct genealogy to Mexican culture. In 1937, Aslinger drafted the *Marijuana Tax Act,* prohibiting the possession, consumption and sale of cannabis, and enforced a mandatory tax for companies involved in the import, distribution, or prescription of marijuana for health purposes. Though the Act did not criminalize medical consumption of cannabis, the extensive regulations and high tax caused many medical professionals to face arrest or financial punishment.[15] The enforcement of, and obedience towards the Marijuana Tax Act by the public was largely fuelled by the release of an anti-marijuana propaganda film, *Reefer Madness,* less than a year before. The hour-long film depicted the harrowing fall from grace of a group of highschool students, pressured into smoking marijuana for the first time. With just one taste, the once kind, ideal teenagers quickly morphed into murderers, sexual abusers, and victims of psychological breaks. The idea that something could elicit such vulgar responses from Americans soon became attributed to the influx of Mexican immigrants and spread of Black culture in the southern states.[16]

[15] Malik Burnett, Amanda Reiman, *How Did Marijuana Become Illegal in the First Place?* 2014 (accessed March 18, 2022); available from https://drugpolicy.org/blog/how-did-marijuana-become-illegal-first-place

[16] Kristin Hunt, *Marijuana Panic Won't Die but Reefer Madness Will Live Forever,* 2020 (accessed March 20, 2022); available from https://daily.jstor.org/marijuana-panic-wont-die-but-reefer-madness-will-live-forever/

As the United States grappled with yet another racially-motivated drug ban, Canada was fourteen years into their own ban on cannabis, yet for a surprisingly different reason. Racial stereotypes and the desire to uphold Canada's Eurocentric image can be directly correlated with parliamentary decisions to ban opium and cocaine, yet the 1923 inclusion of cannabis into the *Narcotics Drug Act Amendment Bill* was caused by something else entirely. After hearing discussions of including cannabis in the fast approaching *International Opium Convention,* Canadian Parliament made the decision to preemptively prohibit the use of cannabis, as to not violate the conditions of the Hague Convention, of which the country had ratified in 1912.[17]

On October 17, 2018, the Canadian government passed the *Cannabis Act,* making the consumption and possession of cannabis for anyone over the age of 18.[18] As countless young adults and teenagers celebrated, a smaller portion of the population was concerned with the racial inequalities that had previously plagued the country's criminalization laws. Statistics concerning the disproportionate number of Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic men arrested for cannabis possession showed a drastically different side of the legalization fad; not at all similar to the soaring popularity of cannabis stocks in the stock market, or the already rich companies pocketing excess profits for their involvement. The conversation of racism in the criminalization, and subsequent decriminalization, of cannabis in Canada speaks to the history of British North America's legislative attempts to depict non-white citizens as morally corrupt and uncivilized. During periods of colonization, the cultivation and sale of cocaine, opium, and cannabis played influential roles in the economic development of the West, and held weight as medical treatments

[17]*The 1925 Geneva Opium Convention* (accessed March 28, 2022); available from https://www.druglibrary.org/schaffer/library/studies/canadasenate/vol3/chapter19_1925_Geneva.htm

[18] Government of Canada, *Cannabis Legalization and Regulation* (accessed March 27, 2022); available from https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/cj-jp/cannabis/

for many years. It was not that the health afflictions of such consumption were not yet discovered, in fact the earliest reports of both cocaine and opium addiction pointed to the effects on the health and life expectancy of white women. Rather, the push to criminalize drugs and propaganda tropes were policy tools to further the racial divide between the ‘proper’, white North Americans, and the uncivilized, non-British ‘Other”.

A Visual Media Presentation of Drug Laws as a Tool of White Supremacy

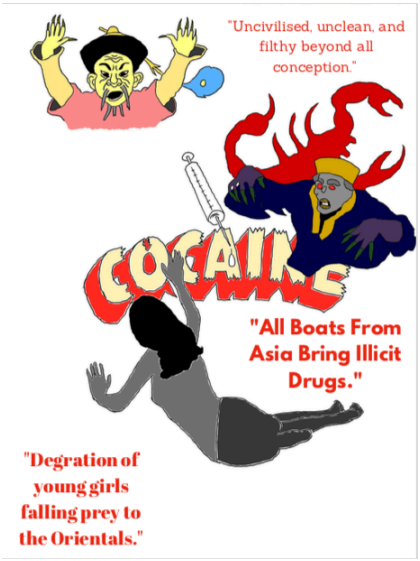
For the visual media component of this paper, I have chosen to present a comparison of original anti-drug propaganda posters, focusing on the criminalization laws of cocaine and marijuana in British North America.

The presentation medium is a TikTok video, and begins by showing the audience the original poster. The screen then displays a variety of quotes from politicians and other influential voices in drug criminalization. These quotes are reflections of the way non-white peoples were viewed. The final image for each that appears is a recreation of the original poster, this time with the words and images altered to reflect the ways in which drug use was used to incite fear against Chinese, Mexican, and Black bodies.

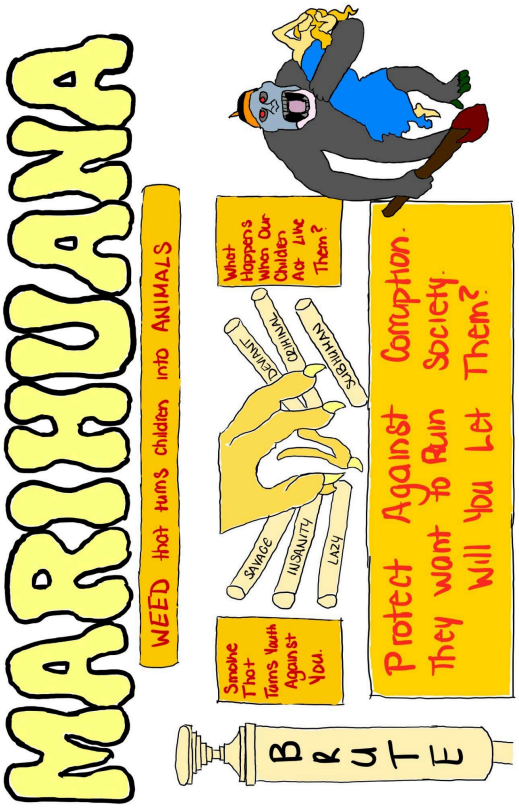
The link for the short clip is posted below, and I have attached copies of the two posters I recreated.

https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMLtFqT9c/


Strips the Soul Bare
INFLAMES THE Senses
BOLD
REVEALING
TRUE
COCAINE
the THRILL that KILLS
ADULT
ENTERTAINMENT
THIS PICTURE IS A LESSON FOR EVERY TEEN-AGER - AND A WARNING FOR EVERY PARENT !
THIS PICTURE IS Definitely NOT RECOMMENDED FOR CHILDREN
TIMELY AS TODAY'S HEADLINES


"Uncivilised, unclean, and filthy beyond all conception."
COCAINE
"All Boats From Asia Bring Illicit Drugs."
"Degration of young girls falling prey to the Orientals."


MARIHUANA
WEED with ROOTS in HELL
NOT RECOMMENDED FOR CHILDREN
MISERY
Smoke That Gets In Youth's Eyes
LUST
CRIME
SORROW
HATE
SHAME
DESPAIR
What Happens ~ Marihuana Parties
WEIRD ORGIES
WILD PARTIES


MARIHUANA
WEED that turns children into ANIMALS
What Happens When Our Children Act Like Them?
Smoke That Turns Youth Against You.
SAVAGE
INSANITY
LAZY
DEVIANT
CRIMINAL
SUICIDAL
Protect Against Corruption. They want to Ruin Society. Will You Let Them?
BRUTE

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