



# **Situating Psychedelics and the War on Drugs Within the Decolonization of Consciousness**

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## **Abstract**

This article provides a rationale for understanding the United States' war on drugs as a biopolitical enterprise that restricts the states of consciousness humans can avail themselves to. Given the intimate relationship between psychoactive drugs and human cognition, perception, and behavior, the tactics of illegalization, persecution, and misinformation mobilized by the war on drugs have inherently delimited the conscious states available to the population. Drug regulations and prohibitions in contemporary US society have resulted in a biopolitical normalization of consciousness that reinvokes colonial refrains of domination historically mobilized against traditional ritual, healing, and spiritual practices and pharmacopeias. From a decolonial perspective, the biopolitical delimitation of consciousness ensuing from the war on drugs can be understood as a form of epistemic hegemony insofar as the alternate states brought about by certain drugs, in this case psychedelic substances, are delegitimized despite an array of evidence attesting to their epistemological, therapeutic, and philosophical import. By examining contemporary research on classic psychedelics, this article illustrates how psychedelics temporarily suppress the top-down structures which maintain normal waking consciousness, including the perceptual and conceptual boundaries that influence behavior. As such, this article examines how classic psychedelic drugs and experiences can be understood as anarchic agents that can assist in decolonizing the spaces of consciousness wherein unyielding colonial patterns of thought have become concretized.

## **Keywords**

Biopolitics; consciousness; decoloniality; psychedelics; war on drugs

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## Introduction

Anarchist, post-anarchist, and critical theorists in human geography have managed to bypass a direct engagement with human consciousness as a pharmacologically mediated political arena. While Marxist and anarchist thinkers alike have examined false, class, historical, and radical consciousness (Debord 1974; Harvey 1990; Reclus 2013), the production of consciousness (Smith 2008), and consciousness raising practices (Gramsci 2007; Routledge 2017, 147), insufficient attention has been directed towards the pharmacological and biological dimensions of human consciousness as a political domain. Given the omnipresence of psychoactive substances in contemporary American society, ranging from food items to pharmaceutical drugs (Szasz 2007; De Sutter 2018), critical theorists have much to gain by analyzing the psychopharmacological dimensions of human consciousness and the political implications which stem thereof. By exploring the political facets of consciousness through the lens of anarchist thought, this article maintains that the United States' war on drugs constitutes a systematic form of oppression which exploits human physiology in ways that favor the ruling capitalist logic and its philosophical underpinnings. Since anarchist thinkers, from Reclus onward, have sought to abolish "all forms" of exploitation, domination, and systems of rule, whether they be exercised within the social body or upon the Earth and nonhuman others (Springer 2012, 1606; Springer et al. 2012, 1593), the delimitation of consciousness imposed through drug prohibition and regulation signals a form of exploitation that operates at the most intimate level of thought, feeling, and perception, as well as on the capacity to form social relations and acquire knowledge.

In order to appreciate how the anarchic call to reject oppression in all its forms must include the liberation of the modes of consciousness humans can avail themselves to, the governmental regulations on psychoactive substances must be approached as constituting a system of rule that results in the domination of human bodies through the management of consciousness. The very fact that humans have a spectrum of conscious states they can experience has broad implications for critical and radical geographers insofar as different states of consciousness can be understood as conferring unique potentialities or diminishments to particular aspects of human cognition, physiology, behavior, and affectual capacities (Roberts 2019). Taking a look at the 'classic psychedelic' substances as a case in point, contemporary neuropharmacological research shows that these substances tend to provoke 'anarchic' brain states that not only enhance levels of entropy in the brain, but also temporarily diminish top-down, hierarchical brain processes while increasing connectivity and bottom-up flows of information (Carhart-Harris and Friston 2019, 336). Apart from the wide range of therapeutic effects psychedelic drugs and experiences exhibit (Kuypers 2019), novel findings also support correlations between psychedelic use and increases in empathy and nature-relatedness (Pokorny et al. 2017; Kettner et al. 2019), as well as potential decreases in authoritarian political views (Lyons and Carhart-Harris 2018). Although each contemporary scientific study on psychedelics must be taken in its proper context, the evidence currently amassing nevertheless directly contradicts the United States' Drug Enforcement Administration's (DEA) Schedule 1 classification of psychedelic drugs as extremely dangerous substances that have a high potential for abuse and no known medicinal value (DEA 2020).

To better understand why psychedelic substances have been rendered illegal in the US, I draw on Foucault's (1978; 2003; 2007) remarks on biopolitics to illustrate how the biological management of the population has long been a mechanism of governance enacted upon human bodies. Viewed through the lens of biopolitics, the war on drugs can be seen as a form of biopolitical governance which encompasses the management of human thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and affectual capacities through the pharmacological management of consciousness. The biopolitical modification of consciousness also has greater implications insofar as psychedelics have, and continue to be, used as epistemic vectors for the acquisition of knowledge. Taking psilocybin-containing mushrooms as an example, they have

traditionally been used across many Mesoamerican native communities for over 2,000 years, for purposes ranging from resolving social conflicts and recovering missing items, to detecting causes of illnesses and acquiring special forms of knowledge (Schultes, Hoffman and Rátsch 1998, 158; Rátsch 2005, 671). The epistemic import of psychedelic experiences is also reflected in contemporary research wherein psychedelics have proven to reliably provoke mystical experiences with noetic qualities (MacLean et al. 2012). Insofar as psychedelic experiences can be understood as potentially having epistemological import (Luna 2016, 279), they signal alternative ways of knowing, making their contemporary demonization and suppression reminiscent of colonial refrains of domination enacted against pagan and indigenous pharmacopeias and traditional practices designed to provoke alternate modes of consciousness.

In reflecting on the epistemological import of psychedelic experiences, this article also draws on decolonial thought to not only argue that alternate states of consciousness may serve as epistemological tools of cognitive resistance, but also to reveal how ordinary normal waking consciousness is the product of a particular configuration of social relations. The epistemic dimension of psychedelic experiences, when viewed from a decolonial perspective emanating from the Global South (Quijano 2000; Alcoff 2007; Maldonado-Torres 2007; Moraña, Dussel, and Jáuregui 2008), can be understood as one of many epistemes, such as dreams and intuitions, that have been eradicated through the global epistemicide produced by the coloniality of power (Mignolo 2012; Santos 2018, 9). In applying decolonial theory to the war on drugs, this article seeks to “interrogate the legacies of European colonialism in contemporary social orders and forms of knowledge” (Oslender 2019). By advancing the theories of biopolitics and decoloniality, I argue that the US war on drugs constitutes a biopolitical enterprise that delimits alternative ways of knowing and being in the world.

This article seeks to make three contributions to radical geography: first, it brings the political dimensions of consciousness to the fore by elucidating on the intimate relationship that psychoactive drugs have to human cognition, perception, and behavior; second, this article extends the concept of biopolitics to include the war on drugs as a biopolitical mechanism aimed at the delimitation of alternate epistemic and experiential sources that fall outside of state sanctioned paradigms; and lastly, it offers a novel take on decolonial theory by considering the experiences provoked by classic psychedelics as potential wellsprings of epistemological import and therefore alternative ways of knowing and being in the world. As a response to the biopolitical management of consciousness enacted by the war on drugs, I maintain that psychedelics can be utilized as anarchic agents to assist in decolonizing normalized states of consciousness while disrupting the epistemic and conceptual heritages of coloniality. Insofar as consciousness is fundamental to one’s sense of volition and subjectivity, serving as the veil through which humans construe reality, this article extends an invitation to critical theorists to further explore how different psychoactive substances might affect one’s philosophical and political commitments, as well as one’s ability to forge new forms of subjectivity and ways of relating to oneself, others, society, and nature.

### **Psychoactive Drugs, Psychedelics, and Human Consciousness**

Although the human history of psychoactive drug use predates the historical record itself (Guerra-Doce 2015; Samorini 2019), psychoactive substances continue to be consumed across virtually all human societies in the world today (Rátsch 2005; McKenna et al. 2017). It should come as no surprise, however, that humans have always used psychoactive drugs—or chemical substances used to attain desirable effects (Iversen 2001)—for a variety of reasons, including curing disease, increasing immunological resistance, enhancing physical and mental endurance, aiding in sleep, changing moods, and altering perception (Szasz 1996, xxiii). For those familiar with ethnopharmacology, it is common knowledge that

pharmacopeias and drug use are relative to each culture (De Rios and Smith 1977). As anthropologist Andrea Blätter (1994, 123) has observed,

In different cultures, drugs are often used in completely different manners. This demonstrates that the consumption of drugs is culturally shaped to a very large extent. Which substances are used, when, by whom, how, how often, and in which dosage, where, with whom, and why, and also which conceptions are related to this are largely dependent upon the cultural membership of a user. Because of these influences, inebriation is experienced and lived out in very different ways, and a drug may be used for different purposes, may be assigned different functions (quoted in Rátsch 2005, 13).

Since psychoactive drug use is highly variable and relative to each society, when one examines the drugs that have been integrated and sanctioned within the United States and Europe, one finds caffeine, alcohol, and sugar holding a pride of place. Sugar itself is fascinating insofar as it not only subtly provokes certain modes of cognition and perception as an ingredient present in a panoply of food items, but it has also contributed significantly to the capitalistic transformation of Western society through the remaking its economic and social foundations (Mintz 1986, 214). Once the omnipresence and cultural relativity of drug use is recognized and acknowledged, however, two things become clear: first, it becomes evident that each cultural pharmacopeia reflects certain societal values and implicit philosophical commitments; and second, it leads one to question how different psychoactive drugs, including those not contained within one's sanctioned cultural selection, might affect one's psychological, physiological, and genetic makeup. Since psychoactive drugs ultimately alter human perceptions, behaviors, and cognitive abilities depending on what types of substances are consumed and how their effects are managed, it leads one to wonder what effects culturally unauthorized drugs might confer, as well as to question to what ends culturally integrated drugs lend themselves.

This article explores these lines of inquiry by taking the psychoactive substances referred to in pharmacological literature as the 'classic psychedelics'—which include dimethyltryptamine (DMT), lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), mescaline, and psilocybin (Johnson et al. 2019)—as a case in point. Since their initial ingress into the United States and Europe as an object of scientific knowledge during the early to mid-twentieth century, psychedelic plants, fungi, and substances have been approached from a number of disciplinary vantage points. From an evolutionary biological standpoint, it has been argued that early humans coevolved with psychedelics insofar as they served as exogenous neurotransmitters that helped spur the development of certain cognitive capacities (Sullivan and Hagen 2002; Sullivan, Hagen, and Hammerstein 2008; Winkelman 2017). Anthropological studies have shown that psychedelics are linked to traditional healing practices across the globe (Ott 1992; Schultes, Hofmann, and Rátsch 1998; McKenna et al. 2017; Torres 2019; Winkelman 2019), in addition to being revered as sacred entities which bestow arcane forms of knowledge (Luna 1984; Winkelman 2002). Psychologists and psychopharmacologists alike have further maintained that psychedelics can provoke transpersonal, religious, spiritual, and mystical experiences, the effects of which tend to be remarkably transformative in the lives of those individuals who experience them (Smith et al. 2004; Griffiths et al. 2006; Richards 2008; Griffiths et al. 2011; Roberts 2013).

Today, the evolutionary, quasi-religious, therapeutic, and epistemological dimensions of psychedelic substances and experiences are being corroborated by contemporary neuroscientific and pharmacological research. While the literature is predominately centered on the therapeutic aspects of psychedelics (Kuypers 2019), with research supporting the efficacy of psychedelics in treating an array of mental health issues such as depression (McCorvy, Olsen, and Roth 2016; Palhano-Fontes et al. 2019; Davis et al. 2020) and substance abuse (Bogenschutz 2017; Johnson, Garcia-Romeu, and Griffiths 2017; Noorani et al. 2018), key studies have shown that psychedelic experiences can also lead to lasting

changes in personality and brain structure (Bouso et al. 2018). Further research suggests that psychedelic experiences can lead to increases in empathy, wellbeing, and creative thinking (Pokorny et al. 2017; Mason et al. 2019), nature-relatedness (Lyons and Carhart-Harris 2018; Kettner et al. 2019), and pro-environmental behaviors (Forstmann and Sagioglou 2017). Studies on psilocybin, considered as the predominant psychoactive ingredient found in “magic mushrooms,” show that experiences induced by psilocybin can lead to surges in life satisfaction and altruism (Griffiths et al. 2011, 162), in addition to positive “long-term changes in behaviors, attitudes, and values” (MacLean, Johnson, and Griffiths 2011, 1453). Researchers suggest that both the phenomenological elements and transformative effects of these psilocybin-induced experiences not only map onto philosophical typologies of mysticism, but that they can reliably be experienced in healthy human subjects, making them “biologically normal” (Griffiths et al. 2011, 664).

Psychedelic experiences have also recently been analyzed in terms of their neuropsychopharmacology, where researchers have shown them to coincide with a temporary suppression of the Default-Mode Network (DMN). The DMN is described as a dominant neural network which constrains cognition by suppressing entropy levels in the brain during most normal waking states of consciousness (Carhart-Harris et al. 2018). Not only does the DMN reinforce high-level priors, or beliefs, in a top-down fashion, but it tends to suppress bottom-up flows of information as well (Carhart-Harris and Friston 2019). In contrast to the constrained styles of cognition that are associated with normal waking consciousness, psychedelic substances tend to enable “unconstrained” modes of cognition (Carhart-Harris et al. 2012). These unconstrained modes of consciousness, or “anarchic” brain states, not only enhance levels of entropy in the brain, but also temporarily diminish the top-down, hierarchical processes associated with the DMN while increasing global neurological connectivity and bottom-up flows of information (Carhart-Harris and Friston 2019, 336). One’s sense of self, or “ego,” is regarded as being intimately linked with the DMN insofar as its constraining effects on cognition are thought create the conditions for the emergence of reasoning and metacognition (Carhart-Harris et al. 2014, 6; Swanson 2018). When the default mode network’s activity is temporarily suppressed by psychedelic substances, one often experiences a dissolution of the perceptual and conceptual boundaries between self and world: “this sense of merging into some larger totality is of course one of the hallmarks of the mystical experience; our sense of individuality and separateness hinges on a bounded self and a clear demarcation between subject and object” (Pollan 2018, 305).

The experiences of ego-dissolution associated with psychedelic experiences are also positively correlated with increased therapeutic effects (Griffiths et al. 2008, 631), the destabilization of rigid beliefs and thought patterns (Carhart-Harris and Friston 2019), and the ability promote exploratory and divergent modes of thought (Carhart-Harris 2018). Beyond their pharmacological ego-suppressing effects, there is also the phenomenological experience of losing oneself that plays a key extra-pharmacological role in how personality changes occur, such as increases in empathy (Pokorny et al. 2017), decreased authoritarian political views (Lyons and Carhart-Harris 2018), and even renewed perceptions of connectedness to oneself, others, and the world (Carhart-Harris et al. 2018). More suggestively, these findings may lend credence to previous associations made between psychedelic experiences and newfound philosophical beliefs based on relationality and nonduality as ontologically and ethically fundamental precepts (Levinas 1969; Osto 2016). It is interesting to note that the psychometric heuristics used to understand psychedelic-mystical experiences in psychopharmacology today draw inspiration from William James’ philosophy of religion. In 1902, James (2004, 329) developed a fourfold typology of mysticism, one of the elements of which is a noetic quality:

Although so similar to states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth

unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule, they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time.

This noetic quality described by James is also operationalized to study psychedelic experiences in today's scientific literature (Griffiths et al. 2011; MacLean et al. 2012), further supporting longstanding attributions made to psychedelic plants and fungi as "plant teachers" that confer special types of knowledge (Luna 1984; Tupper 2002).

Admittedly, the history and scientific literature on psychedelics and their effects is much more expansive and controversial than what has been alluded to here (Pollan 2018). For example, thousands of early scientific studies attested to their medicinal efficacy before psychedelics were eventually made illegal and scientific research became suppressed (Mangini 1998; Dyck 2006). No universal statements can be made about the effects of psychedelic substances either, insofar as there are a multiplicity of factors that influence the effects of psychedelic experiences beyond their pharmacological properties alone (Hartogsohn 2017). To complicate matters even further, psychedelic experiences can potentially have adverse effects on certain individuals in certain contexts, while one also runs the risk of persecution if found with psychedelics insofar as they remain illegal in the United States. Furthermore, there are issues involving the commodification of indigenous knowledge and biopiracy associated with psychedelics, in addition to the cultural appropriation that is rampant in many psychedelic communities.

Notwithstanding these caveats, however, there is nevertheless sufficient evidence to warrant the claim that psychedelic experiences can potentially help to destabilize inherited patterns of thought that have become concretized over time, including the belief in the individual as an isolated and separate self. What evidence now shows it that when utilized in constructive ways, psychedelics can work to deconstruct one's ordinarily held beliefs, including one's sense of self and one's conceptual understanding of reality, in addition to increasing both neurological and phenomenological interconnectedness. Although each psychedelic event must be understood in its own unique context (Malins 2004), the boundary dissolving effects of psychedelic experiences can potentially be used to combat the effects of reductionistic materialism and substance metaphysics, including the severing of relations and alienation from nature that these ideologies spawn. Seen in such a light, classic psychedelics can be utilized as anarchic agents to assist in deterritorializing colonial philosophical heritages, while also offering an experiential basis from which to develop an expanded moral and political compass based on ontologies of interconnectedness and interrelatedness (Levinas 1969, 48). Since psychedelic substances remain illegal in the United States and in many other countries, however, it requires an investigation into the governmental rationality that undergirds the United States' war on drugs itself.

### **The US War on Drugs as a Biopolitical Enterprise**

To substantiate the claim that the war on drugs is a biopolitical enterprise that delimits the spectrum of human consciousness, the war on drugs must first be contextualized within the wider history of drug prohibition in the United States. The regulation and banning of select psychoactive substances began in the nineteenth century in the US, eventually leading to the first federal tax imposed on opium and morphine in 1890 (Redford and Powell 2016, 514). Although alcohol was prohibited in specific counties and states during this time period, the year 1909 would witness, after a series of prior measures aimed against Chinese immigrants, the passing of the Opium Exclusion Act which constituted the first law banning the non-medical use of a substance (Ahmad 2007, 82). Due to a series of "unintended consequences" stemming from early antidrug policies (Redford and Powell 2016, 509), US Congress

passed the Harrison Act of 1914 as the “first major federal anti-drug legislation” (Caquet 2021, 207). The Harrison Act was designed to tax and regulate the importation, manufacture, and distribution of coca and opiates, including their derivatives, while also making it illegal for citizens to purchase or sell these substances without written medical consent (Caquet 2021, 209).

The significance of the Harrison Act is that it set the stage for the prohibition of other substances such as alcohol and cannabis throughout the early to mid-twentieth century. It also laid the groundwork for the Controlled Substances Act (CSA) of 1970, along with the subsequent “War on Drugs” that would ensue. To combat America’s so-called “drug problem” (Nadelmann 1991), Richard Nixon declared a “War on Drugs” in 1971, thereby creating an enduring governmental enterprise with multivalent apparatuses that has come to serve as the foundation for the biopolitical regulation of consciousness. Whereas the CSA categorized drugs such as marijuana and classic psychedelics as highly dangerous Schedule 1 substances that have no known medicinal value and a high potential for abuse, it also allocated vast amounts of federal resources to drug-control agencies while proposing mandatory minimum prison sentences and other strict measures on drug-related crimes. Nixon’s war on drugs would eventually culminate in the creation of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in 1973 during the Reagan presidency, thereby spawning a federally funded specialized police unit designed to target illegal drug use, importation, and distribution, in addition to introducing a series of anti-drug measures (Benavie 2012).

Although the war on drugs was temporarily relaxed during the Jimmy Carter era to a certain extent, President Ronald Reagan reinvigorated the war on drugs by increasing the penalties of drug-related crimes, expanding anti-drug policies, and launching his own “Just Say No” educational campaign against drugs. The Reagan era fortified the anti-drug discourse and legal measures initiated by the Nixon administration, while also portraying illegal drugs enemy weaponry, providing police access to military cooperation, and financially incentivized the targeting of drug offenders (Kuzmarov 2018). During Reagan’s time as president, the US would usher in an unprecedented influx of incarcerations of individuals for nonviolent crimes, with severe penalties being carried out for nonviolent drug-related offenses. Mass incarceration for drug-related crimes continues today, resulting in drastically disproportionate imprisonment rates for people of color when compared to their white counterparts, and also contributing significantly to America being the leading nation in incarceration (Kuzmarov 2018). Tracing this thread back, several critical thinkers have argued that the war on drugs can be understood as a war against particular social and racial groups; its legal precursors historically targeted Chinese immigrants during the early prohibitions of cocaine and opium (Szasz 1974), while the war on drugs itself targeted both the anti-war left and racial minorities during the Nixon era (Baum 2016, 22).

Today, the war on drugs continues to disproportionately funnel black and brown bodies through the prison-industrial-complex which generates profits off of their incarceration (Alexander 2020). As Carl Hart (2013, 5) puts it, “poor people, especially black” continue to excessively suffer the ill effects of the war on drugs through police saturation of so called “troubled neighborhoods.” Furthermore, the war on drugs has helped to “sustain social inequality and socioeconomic disadvantages,” while also contributing to enduring disparities in areas such as health (Singer 2008, 235). Since “most of what people identify as part and parcel of the drug problem are in fact the results of drug prohibition” (Nadelmann, Kleinman, and Earls 1990, 45), the adverse repercussions caused by the war on drugs can be considered nothing other than an “unnatural disaster” (Duke 1995). Moreover, while successful, rationally driven, and economically sound alternatives to the drug war have been formulated and even realized in other countries (Nadelmann 1991; Nadelmann 2014), the legalization, taxation, and decriminalization of certain drugs still has not been considered a serious possibility within the US, with

the sole exception of Oregon's decriminalization of drug possession ruling passed during the 2020 US election.

The oppressive and neocolonial effects that the war on drugs engenders are arguably more insidious when one realizes that the war on drugs also affects the most intimate aspects of one's being given the intimate relationship between humans and psychoactive substances. In a general sense, the Euro-American narrowing of potential conscious states and psychoactive substances can be linked to historical events with lasting repercussions, including European imperialism, forced Christianization, the persecution of traditional healers and so-called witches, the European Enlightenment, positivism, and the Inquisition; all instances wherein the practices and knowledges of particular social groups, including their use of unfamiliar psychoactive substances, were banned and demonized (McKenna 1992; Rättsch 2005, 13). Today, the prohibition of certain drugs, along with the subsequent delimitation of conscious states this entails, can be seen as having resonances with earlier colonial projects, leading some to consider the US war on drugs as a modern-day witch hunt and holy war (Szasz 1974; Benavie 2012). Furthermore, the war on drugs depicts drug users as morally degenerate societal deviants, while also representing those who use illegal drugs as criminals that threaten national security (Lovering 2015; Monteith 2018).

Tracing this trajectory into contemporary times, it helps to approach the governmental rationality that accompanies the war on drugs today through the lens of biopower developed by Michel Foucault (1978; 2003; 2007). Biopower, according to Foucault (2007, 1), refers to new governmental strategies developed during the eighteenth century which aimed at managing the biological aspects of the population. Together with technological and theoretical advancements in mathematics and biology, a new conceptual understanding of humans as a biological species arose in accordance with statistical analysis and other forms of knowledge. These innovative technologies and knowledges afforded governments a newfound way to manage the social body through the operationalization of the population. Thus, the biological management of humans as a species became a novel domain of governmental intervention in eighteenth-century European societies. For Foucault, the new measures of social control which biopower spawned were disciplinary and biopolitical mechanisms. Like other mechanisms designed to normalize society, biopolitics constitutes a "technology of security" that strives to modify "something in the biological destiny of the species" (Foucault 2007, 10). Biopolitics proceeds through targeting populations and organizing them in ways that are productive for the state. Biopolitical forms of power operate as intermediates between "men and things" (Foucault, 2007, 96), playing an active role on the relations that can be obtained between members of the population and "nature" (Foucault 2007, 69). In contrast, Foucault (1978, 139) refers to the secondary form of biopower as "anatomo-politics," or disciplinary mechanisms, which operate through punishment, surveillance, and training as essential strategies for controlling the human body at another scale. Discipline and biopolitics arrange themselves in unique ways to suit different sociopolitical contexts, working in a synergistic way to control aspects of life ranging from the population to the human body (Foucault 2003, 242; Coleman and Grove 2009, 493).

As a heuristic, biopower and biopolitics have lent themselves to a wide range of study (see Lemke 2011). Critical theorists have drawn on biopolitics to help analyze geographies in which irremediable violence occurs (Agamben 1998), and also to explore how biopolitics functions through embodiment, affect, disaster management, resilience, and participatory development to name a few (Guthman 2009; Anderson 2011; Grove 2014; Grove and Pugh 2015; Gallo 2017). In bringing Foucault's concept of biopolitics into conversation with the war on drugs in the United States, I argue that the biological control and management of human states of consciousness through the regulation of drugs is an unexamined area of biopolitical management. For it is through the control and management of certain psychoactive



substances, including the concomitant states of consciousness they provoke, that human experience and knowledge is delimited by governmental apparatuses. Psychedelic substances, once again, are an exemplary case insofar as the states of consciousness they provoke have historically been regarded as deviant from the established hegemonic norm known in psychological literature as “normal waking consciousness” (Edwards 2016). Furthermore, psychedelic states have proven to have epistemological, therapeutic, and arguably even ethical import as I demonstrated in the previous section.

Researchers that study alternate states of consciousness have argued that ordinary, normal waking consciousness is but one of many “mindbody” states that humans can avail themselves to, each of which has a unique ability to enhance certain psychosomatic potentialities or reduce others (Tart 1983; Roberts 2019). In considering ordinary normal waking consciousness as a cultural production that is reinforced through drug regulation, it brings consciousness itself as a political domain to light. While many have argued that psychedelic substances have “psychointegrative” properties and can be used as “psychotechnologies” for healing, epistemic, and moral enhancing purposes (Winkelman 2001; Tupper 2002; Roberts 2013), the war on drugs has nevertheless categorized psychedelics under the most stringent of categories of psychoactive substances while persecuting those who use, cultivate, or distribute them. Through both biopolitical and disciplinary apparatuses, the war on drugs operates on two scales: it first mediates human relations to nature through the psychopharmacological management of the population on one level, while it also depicts those who consume psychedelics as morally degenerate criminals that threaten society on another (Szasz 1974; Lovering 2015; Monteith 2018). The epistemological, therapeutic, and philosophical dimensions of psychedelic states of consciousness are therefore denied to the population through the war on drugs biopolitical enterprise, as is the ability to experience oneself in a new and expanded way. As the following section will illustrate, the biopolitics of consciousness enacted through the war on drugs takes on further significance insofar as its subjugation of consciousness also atrophies other ways of knowing, being, and relating in the world.

## **Decoloniality and Psychedelics**

Critical theorists who write on decolonization vary extensively in terms of their research foci, the manner in which they situate themselves in academic literature, and in the purposes towards which their analytic elucidations aim. Decolonial theorists therefore form a multivalent assortment, with scholars addressing themes ranging from decolonizing methodologies (Smith 2012), decolonizing education (Bird 2005; Tuck and Yang 2012; Zavala 2013), decolonizing the imaginary (Latouche 2015; Feola 2019), and everyday acts of resurgence to name a few (Corntassel 2018). In the tradition of decoloniality which emanates from the Global South, there is an ethical imperative that calls for the weaving of “a world in which many worlds fit” (Escobar 2018, xvi; Mignolo 2018; Oslender 2019, 1693). The tradition of decoloniality positions itself as a direct response to the concept of coloniality—that is, the patterns of domination that emerged during early colonialism, but which continue to define knowledge production, culture, intersubjective relations, and labor relations (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 243; Schulz 2017, 129). Decolonial thought stresses that the colonial patterns of domination initiated by the early conquests are enduring, for they also operate on an epistemological level by establishing hegemonic knowledge systems referred to as “the coloniality of power” (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 140).

As a hegemonic knowledge system, the coloniality of power works to distribute aesthetic, moral, and epistemic resources in ways that not only reflect, but also reproduce, imperial logic (Quijano 2000; Alcoff 2007, 83; Mignolo 2009; 2012). The coloniality of power was not only operative during the early European conquests across the Global South, but it was further fortified in the seventeenth century with the mechanistic philosophy of the René Descartes. Descartes’ philosophy not only resulted in the philosophical bifurcation of nature by separating mind from matter and reducing animals and nature to

automata, but it also lent itself the fortification of capitalism by reinforcing the idea of the individual as an isolated self that remains separate from its environment. The coloniality of power's epistemological hegemony has also been understood as constituting a "cognitive empire" which proceeds by eradicating other ways of knowing through a global "epistemicide" (Santos 2018, 9). Moreover, the coloniality of power is also equipped with a self-defense mechanism which renders it immune to critique insofar as it entails a "circularity of reasoning that [has] preempted the possibility of having an outside critique of epistemology" (Alcoff 2007, 95). Through its deployment of these epistemicidal and self-defense mechanisms, the coloniality of power has led to the belief that there are no alternative ways of understanding the world, for "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism," including the forms of patriarchy and reductionistic scientism it demands (Fisher 2009, 2).

As a response to the coloniality of power and its self-generated immunity to critique, decolonial thought works to expose coloniality's epistemic hegemony and suppression of alternative epistemological paradigms. It highlights that other ways of knowing have historically been denied by Eurocentric canons entrenched in occularcentrism, propositional knowledge, formal logic, and means of justification (Mignolo 2002; Alcoff 2007, 93). These criteria for what can count as proper knowledge have placed limitations on what can be known insofar as other ways of acquiring knowledge have been illegitimated due to their inability to conform to these formal rules. Decolonial thinkers maintain that "multiple ways of being and knowing have always existed outside of the modern scientific worldview," and that these other ways of knowing and being stand as testament to the fact that other worlds and forms of social relations are possible (Schulz 2017, 138). The seeds of resistance for decolonial theorists therefore stem from "the experiences and views of the world and history of those [...] who have been, and continue to be, subjected to the standards of modernity" (Mignolo 2005, 8).

For decolonial theorist Walter Mignolo (2012, 9), the return of gnosis signals a mode of decolonial thinking that is needed to recover epistemes that have historically been subjugated by the coloniality of power. By bringing the "geo- and body-politics of knowledge" to the fore, decolonial thought brings attention to the fact that alternative epistemologies have historically been silenced and "radically devalued" by "Western epistemology" (Tlostanova and Mignolo 2012, 4). What geo- and body-politics of knowledge ultimately offer, however, are decolonial possibilities such as "epistemic disobedience" that disparate groups can mobilize in the renewal and recovery of their own particular and local histories (Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006; Mignolo 2009, 15). By placing the "locus of enunciation" in communities as a means of delinking "the production of subjects through discourses and practices linked to the exercise of power" (Tlostanova and Mignolo 2012, 43), decoloniality thereby creates a space for the emergence of alternate, self-constitutive forms of knowledge and subjectivity (Escobar 2008, 205).

One may wonder, however, in the context of decoloniality, where science has often been portrayed as operating as a neocolonial mechanism, what role the science and rational thought have in this conversation. Psychedelics present a curious case insofar as they remain illegal in the US, while those practices and peoples associated with psychedelic substances have endured decades, if not centuries, of oppression. There has also been a suppression of scientific research on psychedelics until recently due to funding restrictions as well as both public and scientific perception of them (Miller 2017, 14). From a decolonial perspective, however, scientific thinking and practice may be put to subversive use through "counterhegemonic appropriation" (Santos 2018, 30). Counterhegemonic appropriations refer to philosophies, concepts, and practices spawned by "dominant social groups" but which become "appropriated by oppressed groups." In the process, counterhegemonic appropriations reconfigure and re-signify dominant ways of knowing and mobilize them as tools that can arm one in "struggles against domination" (Santos 2018, 31). In this sense, once modern science takes its place among other ways of

knowing in the “ecologies of knowledges,” it can be utilized as a valuable tool “in the struggles against oppression” (Santos 2018, 45).

In drawing on decolonial thought, this article gains a conceptual framework through which to understand psychedelic experiences insofar as their epistemological import and unexplored potentials have historically been dominated by “the colonial matrix of power” (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 6). Not only have the therapeutic, spiritual, and epistemological dimensions of psychedelic substances and experiences been denied to the US population given the illegalization of psychedelic drugs, but the self-expanding and positive psychosocial effects psychedelic experiences confer have also been negated. By restricting the population’s ability to experience the alternate modes of consciousness brought about by psychedelic drugs, the war on drugs extends the longstanding colonial legacy of delimiting human consciousness, while more recently establishing “normal waking consciousness” as a hegemonic norm (Edwards 2016). More importantly, as the regimes of truth established by the coloniality of power continue to delegitimize all epistemic claims which fall outside of the occularcentric, logocentric, and positivist frameworks (Tuathail 1996, 84), alternative means of acquiring knowledge through visionary experiences, dreams, intuitions, or psychedelic states of consciousness have also been dismissed as illegitimate.

When viewed from the perspective of the coloniality of power, the noetic quality and profound insights psychedelic experiences tend to confer can be understood as subjugated forms of knowledge and alternative understandings of the world that have been suppressed in Euro-American cultures for centuries (Foucault 2003, 10). However, when used in intentional and constructive ways, psychedelic substances and the experience they provoke can facilitate the ability to revise of one’s previously held beliefs and conceptual heritage (Carhart-Harris and Friston 2019), enforce stronger links between one’s sense of environment and one’s sense of self (Tagliazucchi et al. 2016), and even enhance feeling of connectedness to oneself, others, and the world at large (Carhart-Harris et al. 2018). By utilizing the conceptual framework of decoloniality, psychedelic experiences can thus be understood as forms of epistemic disobedience and alternative routes of acquiring knowledge that fall outside of the coloniality of power and the coloniality of nature (Escobar 2008). Since some of the purposes to which classic psychedelics have been put in the United States involve self-exploration and acquiring deep insights about oneself and one’s relations, psychedelic experiences can also be understood as effective technologies of the self insofar as they can potentially be used as tools to assist in the resingularization of subjectivity (Foucault 1988; Guattari 2000, 68; Nielsen 2014).

## Conclusions

In drawing on classic psychedelic substances and experiences as a case in point, this article has argued that the United States’ war on drugs can be understood as both a colonial and biopolitical enterprise that intervenes in human biology and cognition through the regulation of psychoactive substances. Given the intimate relationship obtained between psychoactive drugs and human consciousness, the war on drugs, like countless colonial projects before it, has historically denied certain dimensions of human experience to the population along with the epistemological, therapeutic, and affectual potentialities they confer. Through the management of the psychoactive plants, fungi, and substances that the population can consume, the war on drugs reinforces a normalization of consciousness that negates the value and veracity of alternate forms of consciousness. By denying other possible ways of knowing, being, and relating in the world that are provoked by certain psychoactive substances, the war on drugs makes each of us “at once the beneficiaries and the victims of our culture’s particular selection” (Tart 1983, 4). The biopolitics of consciousness enacted through the war on drugs becomes more tangible when one examines classic psychedelic substances insofar as they have been banned in

the United States since 1970, if not earlier in some cases. Despite the governmental discourse which undergirds the illegalization of psychedelics by positing that they are highly dangerous and addictive substances with no known medical value or application, there is now an insurmountable array of evidence that characterizes psychedelic drugs and their effects in the opposite manner while highlighting their prosocial and transpersonal effects.

Psychedelic substances and experiences do not come without significant caveats of their own, however, insofar as each event of drug consumption affects “different people in different ways, depending in a large part on one’s intention and the setting in which they are taken” (Lattin 2017, 9). As such, each psychedelic experience should be understood in its own unique context as an exclusive assemblage that yields potentialities relative to each individual’s lifeworld (Malins 2004). While their neuropharmacological properties do facilitate alternate patterns of information processing and establish new relationships and forms of communication within the brain, this does not guarantee that psychedelic drugs will necessarily deterritorialize rigid thought patterns or lead to new philosophical precepts. The person, the phenomenology of their experience, and the meaning they make from it all play a key role in how psychedelics affect a person. Therefore, the intention, expectation, environment in which they are consumed, and the purposes to which classic psychedelics are put are all central to understanding how they can help to decolonize consciousness, for “it isn’t the drug that creates the experience; it’s the drug that opens the doors to what is already resident inside the person” (Shulgin 1997, 191). By bringing psychedelic experiences to the subject of decolonization then, it must be clear that psychedelic drugs have no inherent decolonizing affect since they may lend themselves to any number of purposes (Price 2007; Passie and Benzenhöfer 2018).

Notwithstanding the caveats that accompany psychedelic drugs and experiences, decolonial theorists have turned attention to the fact that multiple ways of knowing and being have been eradicated by coloniality and its accompanying “epistemological imperialism” (Tuathail 1996, 76). The epistemicide that coincides with the coloniality of power has not only historically subjugated other ways of knowing and being for millennia, but it also rejects the epistemic dimensions and transformative effects of psychedelic experiences as a contemporary casualty of the war on drugs. By denying the population access to psychedelic states of consciousness, while also devaluing the experiences that classic psychedelics provoke, the war on drugs mobilizes both disciplinary and biopolitical mechanisms which delimit the exploration of other ways of knowing, relating, and experiencing oneself, others, and the world. By acknowledging the cultural relativity of drug use and pharmacopeias across human societies, it becomes clear that the drugs which are retained and dispelled within contemporary US society tend to reflect the dominant philosophical underpinnings and political motives of its “intellectuals of statecraft” (Tuathail 1996, 14). Now that contemporary research is beginning to suggest that psychedelic experiences can lead to increases in nature-relatedness (Lyons and Carhart-Harris 2018; Kettner et al. 2019), enhancements in one’s capacity for empathy and openness (Pokorny et al. 2017; MacLean, Johnson, and Griffiths 2011), and even a renewed sense of connectedness with oneself, with others, and the world at large (Carhart-Harris et al. 2018), it appears that their suppression has helped to reinforce a colonial hegemony on epistemology, consciousness, experience, and social relations.

Furthermore, insofar as psychedelic substances facilitate anarchic brain states wherein one’s beliefs, and therefore one’s concretized conceptual heritage, are relaxed and can be revised (Carhart-Harris and Friston 2019), psychedelic experiences point to one possible path of challenging patriarchal capitalism, its philosophical underpinnings, and the forms of social relations it spawns. For if the experiences of boundary dissolution that psychedelic drugs tend to confer can lead to an expanded and interconnected sense of self, and this new conception of self in turn challenges both liberal understandings of the subject along with Eurocentric forms of philosophy which bifurcate and therefore

alienate us from nature, then psychedelics may be considered as potential anarchic agents that can help decolonize the behavioral, perceptual, and conceptual heritages that have emanated from the colonality of power (Falcon 2020). Since alternate states of consciousness play a role in shaping a community's sense of place, and therefore may reinforce either an interdependent, holistic, and sacred understanding of one's landscape or a fragmented, individualistic, and analytic sense of place and self, psychedelic experiences may provide a means of ameliorating contemporary human-environment relations as well (Laughlin 2013). However, insofar as "many of us [I include myself] continue to act in ways that are dyed in the colors of colonial power" (Gregory 2004, xv), this may be because we have failed to liberate consciousness itself from the grips of oppression. But since there can be "no social justice without cognitive justice" (Santos 2018, 6), it is imperative to explore alternative ways of knowing, being, and relating to one another and the world, and psychedelic experiences provide a starting point as tool that can, in certain respects, assist in decolonizing consciousness.

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