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***Romper estigmas: arte y cannabis en Norteamérica***  
 (Breaking Stigmas: Art and Cannabis in North America)

Volume 1, Activisms

Aaraón Díaz Mendiburo and Marty Otañez, editors

The use, and by extension cultivation and distribution, of cannabis has been prohibited for at least the last hundred years. This is starting to change. In effect, little by little, very gradually, pathways have opened for the legalization of marihuana in several countries and regions in some areas of interest for consumers: first, it was authorized for medicinal use, then cultivation in small quantities for personal consumption, including recreational use; later, permission was even given to open shops and establishments like cafes, where customers can purchase and consume it, albeit with some restrictions, and acquire a variety of paraphernalia used to enjoy marihuana in different forms.

Needless to say, this evolution of the legal status of cannabis is not a spontaneous, disinterested concession on the part of authorities and governments. On the contrary, it has required the involvement and active agency of many collectives of different types with equally varied objectives, most of which have emerged from civil society as groups of people who value, and therefore defend, their right of access to freely consume the substance.

Thus, marihuana legalization is a struggle, which, in many places, has achieved most, if not all, of its goals. A crucial issue still to be resolved is that the legal frame-

work for its production, distribution, and consumption is insufficient to provide effective protection of the rights of persons who engage in such activities. We still need to overcome lingering stigmas, stereotypes, and myths, which in some contexts have even grown more widespread, regarding people who use cannabis and have incorporated it into their lifestyle and worldview.

In effect, despite legalization, regular cannabis users are still discriminated against and socially judged as “misfits” in mainstream society, and stereotypes still persist characterizing them as potentially dangerous to social stability and harmony. A “stoner”—used pejoratively—is someone who, according to the social construct promoted by the hegemonic media and dominant ideologies and public policies, directly or indirectly disrupts social peace. The thinking behind these views is that, according to this archetype constructed from the *de facto* powers, they are persons who easily lose self-control when they are under the influence of cannabis, and as a result are prone to incur in antisocial behavior that harms the interests of others. In other words, legalization notwithstanding, cannabis consumption is still demonized, morally judged as negative, and widely discouraged in most social circles.

The book outlined here seeks not only to combat this kind of stigmatizing thinking but also to uncover the false premises it rests on. For a long time now, public discourse and medical and political advances have shown that no provable relationship exists between marijuana consumption and antisocial behavior (without engaging in the debate on what can or cannot be considered “antisocial”). On the contrary, for example, science has helped consolidate the idea that cannabis, far from being a problem for users, offers numerous benefits. Moreover, the relevant point is that it has confirmed multiple advantages of consuming marijuana, both as a medication, to relieve pain and symptoms of disease, and for people’s psychological and emotional well-being.

Again needless to say, it is untrue that marijuana is a gateway to the use of other drugs; this is a fallacy used by prohibitionists unsupported by any objective data. Nor is it true that distribution and commercialization of cannabis encourage the spread of organized crime and the formation of drug trafficking groups; rather, such phenomena are products of prohibition, which in many ways is a central pillar of the massive business that has developed around drug trafficking.

So, what are we to do to counter these discourses that stigmatize the use of cannabis? According to the editors of this four-volume set entitled *The Arts and the Deconstruction of Stigmas Surrounding Cannabis in North America*, of which we comment on the first volume here, artistic discourse is precisely one of the most effective means of unmasking prejudiced, stigmatizing arguments. Throughout the collection, the different contributors address the relevance of artistic narratives in this massive effort to disprove falsehoods. Not only do they reflect on the power of music, literature, film, the performing arts, the visual and graphic arts, and even, in a modern context, digital arts and the use of social networks, to build awareness and, more accurately, serve as a vehicle for people to interpret their realities as multifaceted and multivocal, they also highlight the capacity for artistic expression to influence other legitimate forms of knowledge and self-knowledge beyond the strictly rational. In effect, the artist’s gaze facilitates access to forms of perception and wisdom that consider other ways of appropriating the world: among them intuition, emotions, feelings, and even serendipity.

In this first volume of the series, *Activisms*, we encounter a wide variety of narratives and stories that show

—more than prove— how the cannabis experience, conscious and responsible use of marijuana, can not only be liberating for the individual, but can even act as a springboard to find and/or strengthen the meaning of their lives. One of the book’s unquestionable merits is that it can be classified as an academic work but without conforming to the traditional forms of academic prose and discourse. In this sense, the editors have preferred to combine three types of discursive approach to a common reality: the article, which draws on various sources in an attempt to offer new and original knowledge; testimony, which achieves its aims based on the experience of the protagonists as an original source; and finally, the semi-structured interview, which relies on productive interaction between researchers and the subjects-objects of study. This combination works because it gives the reader a panoramic view of the issues approached from a multidimensional, and in a certain sense panoptic, perspective in which objective and scientific reflection, based on theory and methodology, on the one hand, and knowledge drawn from the experience of those who live day to day immersed in an existential relationship with the object of study, and as a result undertake its defense as a life’s pursuit, as a political program, on the other, merge to broaden our understanding of issues related to cannabis.

Aaraón Díaz Mendiburo and Homero Mendoza Sánchez begin the adventure with the text “La resistencia a través de la oralidad y las artes: las narrativas en torno a las y los activistas de la marihuana en América del Norte” (Resistance through Orality and the Arts: Narratives Surrounding Marijuana Activists in North America), in which they describe how certain narratives, in this case originating in the visual arts, converge to influence and participate in the struggle against the stereotypes constructed historically around consumption of cannabis. They study two specific cases of artistic discourse, engravers and so-called “urban artists,” who, with their work, “intervene” in public spaces and open them to discussion—also public— of what cannabis use means. The debate on the relevance of taking or “intervening in” public spaces to influence social understanding of the meaning of cannabis and its uses is, unquestionably, one of the article’s primary contributions, as it constitutes a form of social and political action in a broader effort to unmask myths and debunk stigmas. It also exposes us to a specific vision that conceives art as narrative, necessarily bound to

taking a position committed to society's collective causes and concerns. The authors obtain their information from conversations with the artists themselves, giving oral communication a privileged place in the methodology chosen to deconstruct stereotypes, very close to what is known as participant observation.

The first testimony presented here is by Dulce Mariana Tapia Aguirre and Víctor García López, founders and directors of the Terraza Weera organization, devoted to promoting and emphasizing personal cultivation of cannabis based on what they themselves define as “the construction of cannabis gardening and a culture of cannabis from the Global South.” Their story is addressed on two planes, the personal and the political. They tell us the personal and intimate reasons that led them to assume an active political position on cannabis consumption, and, on another level of discourse, they describe their specific struggles, actions, and interests. Thus, in a kind of activist introspection, the actors dialogue with themselves about their motivations and how they crystallized in their activism, showing us how our convictions almost always grow out of the challenges life poses. Concretely, Dulce Mariana and Víctor have devoted their time to helping people who want to grow cannabis using artisanal methods and in small quantities, mainly for their own consumption. Their work is relevant because they teach novice growers different techniques and the most effective procedures for producing high-quality harvests with an optimum cost-benefit ratio.

A specific and engaging vision of the defense of cannabis culture is that of women consumers. They suffer social prejudice in at least two different dimensions: their condition as marijuana users and their gender. The chapter “Mujeres Forjando Porros, Forjando Luchas: la red feminista cannábica que rompe estigmas a través del arte y la cultura” (Women Rolling Joints, Forging Struggles: The Feminist Cannabis Network Breaking Stigmas through Art and Culture), by Estefanía Millán, Monserrat Angulo, and Rebeca Soto, centers on a reflection from the authors' feminist perspective on the complexities, discriminations, stigmatizations, and even attacks they are subject to just by being women who smoke cannabis in our societies. Based on their own experiences and those of their fellow activists, who contribute multiple testimonies as part of a methodology of semi-structured, in-depth interviews, the authors describe a reality in which the prejudices they

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face for using marijuana are compounded by the stereotypes that social constructs create around being women smokers. This is because, even within their own cannabis-using circles, women are regarded with suspicion and at times are subject to discrimination by their fellow cannactivists, who are often incapable of shedding androcentric and heteronormative behavior and attitudes rooted in a patriarchal mindset. Thus, for example, one of the interviewees mentions how hard it can be to share spaces to smoke with men, who often confuse their shared solidarity and identification as consumers with a misplaced confidence to go further, overstepping boundaries that they see as weakened in an atmosphere of stoner comradeship, with actions that differ little from the harassment or outright abuse of entrenched patriarchal norms. From a position of theoretical and militant feminism, the members of Women Rolling Joints, Forging Struggles assume a commitment, precisely, to lead struggles and embrace causes that combat not only prejudice and stigma but also inappropriate conduct against women. And in their work they employ multiple strategies, one of them the practice of sisterhood among women smokers and another making use of art and culture—and not any kind of art but art that necessarily has to be committed and subversive.

A singular chapter is “Lilushismo, una modernidad con aroma de cannabis” (*Lilushismo*, Cannabis-Scented Modernity), a testimony by Alejandra Alcantar, a cannactivist known by the handle Lilush on social media, which she uses, precisely, to participate in efforts to destigmatize cannabis-related practices. Her activism, primarily on Instagram, seeks to spread information on the cannabis plant that helps combat the stereotypes that have developed around it over more than a hundred years of prohibition and illegality. “Lilas,” as she is also known, uses art and games to reach a broad audience. She orga-

nizes a wide assortment of online dynamics to make her information more friendly and accessible to the broader public. A curious example were contests she organized to choose the best design of a bong and a joint, and another featuring installations alluding to growing cannabis in lockdown during the pandemic. With efforts like these, she seeks to link the inherent creativity of art with cannabis consumption to demonstrate one of its many positive uses.

This first volume concludes with interviews with two recognized activists for the free use and full legalization of cannabis in Canada and the United States. They have both also used artistic narratives as one of the most effective means of building awareness in the population at large not only of the plant's multiple benefits, but also of the vast number of stigmas and criticisms that have accompanied its use.

The first is a conversation with the Canadian lawyer, dramatist, and actor Russel Bennett, who has specialized in the defense and legal representation of the interests of small cannabis producers and distributors in Toronto, and has also been a constant critic of cannabis legislation that has been enacted in Canada. Although it ended historic prohibition, that legislation has also facilitated encroachment on the market by large producers and multinational corporations to the detriment of small growers and distributors and home growing for personal consumption. It is noteworthy that Russell, who in addition to his legal work is a professional actor, wrote, directed, and performed in a monologue called *The Reefer Man*, alluding to these issues which had a highly successful tour in Canada. He also codirected the documentary *Stoned: Hemp Nation on Trial*, which narrates the life and vicissitudes of Chris Clay, the first owner of a hemp store in Canada, who was arrested and prosecuted twice, and produces and hosts the podcast *Cannabis Law in Canada*. He offers another example of how artistic counternarratives can oppose stigmatizing narratives.

In the case of the United States, the book includes a conversation with the activist Danny Stange, who describes his efforts in the Denver, Colorado, area to combat not only stigmas surrounding cannabis but also the stereotypes used, at times with devastating effect, to negatively label Mexican-Americans. He also discusses his struggle to raise awareness about the devastating effects the so-called “war on drugs” has produced in Mexico, but also in the United

States. Danny's uses education as his primary tool to design courses and programs for the population at large, but he is also involved in community work of construction and reinforcement of identities, like that of Mexican-Americans, with whom he participates in traditional dance groups like those known as *concheros*. Once more, the power of artistic expression as a destigmatizing counternarrative.

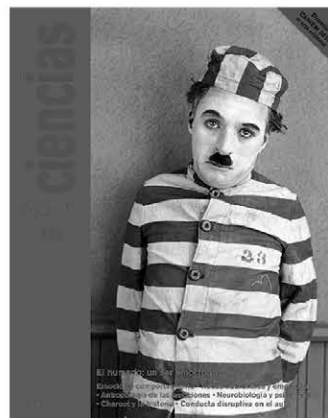
This unprecedented Spanish-language effort of compiling reflections and testimonies on some of the most representative cannabis-related struggles makes this collection an indispensable resource for understanding the evolution of social awareness of cannabis consumption and uses in North America. The collection itself constitutes a political manifesto, presenting a clear position from the outset. It does not necessarily aspire to open debates with other positions, much less with those espoused by prohibitionists, but rather is based on the conviction that legalization is an unquestionable and unequivocal advance in the fight for individual freedoms and the free expression of personality. However, it takes the view that being open to debate and hearing opposing arguments not only reinforces the democratic meaning of these struggles but could also constitute a highly efficient strategy for making truth prevail.

For example, although artistic narratives of all kinds undoubtedly contribute a considerable critical mass of thinking, action, and—as said before—intuition, creativity, and sensitivity to our efforts to understand the world of cannabis with the broadest possible vision, we would be well advised to consider, and make room for, other narratives that also share such intentions. I am referring, for example, to scientific, medical, anthropological, and political discourse, and those emanating from ancestral practices involving the use of psychoactive substances of natural origin in general, and even what religions and worldviews have to say on the subject. In this sense, expanding the collection to include new volumes that focus on these considerations could, in my view, enrich what is already an extremely valuable research project, which, of course, has been more or less exhaustive and highly revealing from the standpoint of artistic discourse, and even more so, from the commitment and taking a stance on the role the arts should play in transforming society. ■■■

Diego Ignacio Bugada Bernal  
Editor at CISAN

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