

Institute for Regional and International Studies Graduate Student Summer Fieldwork Award  
Report

“A Dialectics of Intoxication: Addiction, Violence and Vision in Latin American Cultural Production”

Joseph Patteson  
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The Institute for Regional and International Studies’s Graduate Student Summer Fieldwork Award made possible a very productive research trip to Mexico this summer, in support of my dissertation project, which interrogates Latin American cultural products that emerge from the urgency of the global War on Drugs, pressing them for insights into the contradictory ways in which intoxication is deployed globally to define the self and the other. The most penetrating line of analysis into cultural products of the narco era has focused on a certain narrative “sobriety” that characterizes many recent “narconarratives,” and a stark boundary is drawn between these works and previous literary and cultural tendencies that were interested in intoxication itself. However, while indigenous practices with psychotropic substances or historical countercultural explorations are in many ways a world apart from the gritty realities of narcotrafficking and its hard-edged representations, the distinct ways in which different forms of psychotropy mediate relationships between self and other must be placed together in a historical and comparative framework in order to allow for a broad consideration of the relationship between intoxication and culture. Viewed through such a framework, many cultural products emerging from Latin America strongly suggest ways in which a broadly conceived psychotropy in fact influences every aspect of trafficking and interdiction efforts, far beyond the obvious demand for illegal drugs themselves.

My visit to Mexico was important for the development of the chapter of my dissertation that will develop this historical context, including the 1936 visit to Mexico of legendary dramatic theorist Antonin Artaud, who would make contact with an indigenous culture (the Tarahumara) that represented

a way out of a Western rationality he considered spiritually bankrupt. Artaud is an important case study for my project because he functions as a nodal point that connects so many types of intoxication while embodying the tension between the imposition of the self and an openness to the other. As a person living with mental illness, Artaud's consciousness was already "altered," and his opiate addiction created one form of intoxication and then another when sudden abstinence led to debilitating withdrawal symptoms. He was also taken with his own construction of the Mexican Other and with the intoxicating possibility that through the peyote rites of the Tarahumara he could be privy to visions that would inform an alternative to Western consciousness. In Mexico City, Artaud played the complex role of both prestigious foreign intellectual and destitute addict worthy of pity and charity. The nature of his relationships with his Mexican friends and acquaintances is vital for understanding a case that is in many ways the prototype of the countercultural pilgrimage of the foreigner to Latin America.

My archival research in Mexico City enabled me to delve deeper into the history and significance of Antonin Artaud's visit to Mexico. I consulted a number of institutions including the Archivo Histórico de la Biblioteca Nacional de la Universidad Autónoma de México, the Acervo Histórico de Bellas Artes, and the Acervo Histórico de Teatro. While some of these institutions proved to be of limited usefulness to my project, and some were gravely underfunded or even stalled in early phases of development, others yielded items of interest. Of the archives and libraries I visited, by far the most productive in terms of my research was the Hemeroteca Nacional in the Universidad Autónoma de México, where I was able to locate a number of translations of articles written by Artaud for *El Nacional* newspaper, as well as a number of mentions of him in the same periodical. The task remains of verifying whether I unearthed anything previously unknown, but irrespective of that question, the primary documents I was able to copy will go a long way in informing my own work on Artaud.

In addition to the archival work undertaken, my time in Mexico made possible a number of conversations with people ranging from academics and publishers to musicians, taxi drivers, and people

on the street. These formal and informal talks tremendously enriched my understanding of a number of topics related to my dissertation project, including indigenous drug practices, countercultural travelers to Mexico, endogenous Mexican countercultural traditions and drug use--specifically the cultural context of *la onda literaria*, narco-violence and climates of fear, narco-official collusion, cultural expressions relating to narco-violence, and narcocultura. Without the support of the Institute for Regional and International Studies in the form of the Graduate Student Summer Fieldwork Award, this trip would not have been possible and my dissertation project would remain severely diminished as compared to how it stands now. I would like to convey my heartiest thanks to IRIS for their help in making this productive trip a reality.