14. Coca(ine)

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According to Canadian anthropologist Wade Davis, "Coca is no more cocaine than potatoes are vodka" (18).[1] He seems to imply that we should disconnect cocaine as an object from its material origin, the coca plant. The reason why he makes such a strong statement is his aversion to the stimulant cocaine and the violent conflict it has given rise to, together with a profound wish to protect the coca plant and the indigenous cultures attached to it.

Cocaine was discovered by Albert Niemann, a German graduate student, in 1860. Among critics, the reduction of cocaine to a capitalist commodity is common, as is the veneration of the coca leaf as a raw, natural material—one that carries with it a distinctive spiritual power. Coca and cocaine are thus seen as two entirely different things with separate histories (Britto 14). From such a perspective, the "war on drugs" rhetoric unjustly demonizes both the alkaloid and the plant. Or, to put it differently: the forced eradication of the coca leaf is the consequence of a flawed strategy. Not only should the coca leaf not be reduced to its chemical derivate, cocaine (other uses are increasingly being explored), but also the eradication of the illegal drug traffic should be oriented toward decreasing consumption (in the Global North) instead of destroying production (in Latin America) (Davis 30).

Much can be said about this discussion, but first, it is useful to observe that the dichotomy between coca and cocaine breaks down if we take a closer look. The perception of the coca leaf as a "raw material" is problematic. As Adam Drazin states, it is necessary to attack "the myth of rawness," as it seems to be based on the "mistaken notion that materials are more 'natural' than objects" (24). This implies an "ideology of nature," according to which indigenous cultures are portrayed as a pristine territory with immaculate rituals.

In fact, the coca plant has always been part of cultural negotiation and gave way to different cultural processes and dynamics from as early as 2000 BC (Davis 24). The coca leaf was already a symbol of power and authority during the Inca empire. Later, yet long before cocaine became a global commodity, the Spanish converted the coca

1 All translations of Davis and other quotations from authors published in the special issue of OPCA are by the author.

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leaf into merchandise. Today, indigenous communities in Bolivia, Peru, and Colombia are selling other products made from the coca leaf (coca tea, coca biscuits, etc.). While this is institutionally encouraged in Bolivia and Peru, where the coca leaf is protected as cultural heritage constitutionally and in law, the situation in Colombia is far more complex. The Nasa indigenous people from the Calderas *resguardo*[2] in Tierradentro launched the product Té Coca Nasa in 1999, which they wanted to bring onto the market, stimulating rural development in the region. However, in 2007 the Colombian Institute for the Control of Medicines and Food decided that the production and trade of products made from the coca leaf needed to be restricted to indigenous territories, which blocked the community's ambitions to develop a sustainable and profitable business model that could help them out of poverty. David Curtidor Argüello, one of the co-founders of the enterprise Coca Nasa, denounces the paternalism and the "microracisms" inherent in Colombian law (47). In his view, the court's decision to allow the use and commodification of the leaf only within indigenous territories does not recognize the community's intellectual and cultural ownership of the leaf. Limiting coca's use to the indigenous territories reduces the plant to a pristine, spiritual power, reinvigorating the colonial and racial power dynamics in which it is still entangled.

While the coca leaf is often stereotyped as the "raw material," cocaine is typically seen as essentially immaterial. In his book *Narcocapitalism,* the Belgian legal scholar Laurent de Sutter foregrounds an intrinsic relation between cocaine and capitalism, stating that "cocaine only exists in an economic system appropriate to its volatility, its illegality, its addictiveness and its immateriality" (43). Such a perspective renders cocaine essentially immaterial—a view countered by several historians who introduced commodity studies within drug studies. Using Wallerstein's world-systems theory as a source of inspiration, they began empirically analyzing how different substances, including peyote (Dawson), marihuana (Campos), and cocaine (Topik et al.), became crucially involved within the global commodity chains that were used to build the world economy from colonialism onward. In his groundbreaking monograph *Andean Cocaine: The Making of a Global Drug* (2008), historian Paul Gootenberg examines how coca developed into cocaine as a "glocal" commodity from a regional, national, and transnational perspective from 1850 to the present day. Taking his firm belief that "not all drug history originates in Washington" (Gootenberg and Campos 4) as his starting point, Gootenberg pays special attention to the development of crude cocaine in Peru as an intermediate substance from which the alkaloid can be extracted, and which largely facilitated the trade. His take on cocaine is also influenced by Appadurai's "social lives of things" and Kopytoff's "cultural biography" of commodities, as he analyses channels of both economic and noneconomic flows in

2 "*Resguardo*" is equivalent to the English "reservation" but has precise connotations in both colonial and republican terms, which is why it is used here instead of its English equivalent.

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which, among others, politics, legal systems, and medicine play an important role. The agency of things, or affects circulated by those materials, are not part of his research: "In drug studies, commodity or material perspectives are sorely needed for cooling down the burning and distorting passions that often surround mind-altering, contested, forbidden goods" (Gootenberg, *Andean Cocaine* 8). He, therefore, proposes to treat "drugs as 'mere' commodities in the way they are built up and accepted like other exchangeable things and in the ways they acquire, carry, and convey meanings" (8).

A different approach to the materiality of cocaine can be found in the work of the Australian anthropologist Michael Taussig. In *My Cocaine Museum* (2004), he proposes to consider cocaine as a substance that "shapes the country" (11) and a fetish: "gold and cocaine are *fetishes,* which is to say substances that seem to be a good deal more than mineral or vegetable matter. They come across more like people than things, spiritual entities that are neither, and this is what gives them their strange beauty" (18). Taussig travels to the Southwest Pacific region in Colombia to see how cocaine—and coca—together with gold have impacted communities for many centuries and how they are part of what Tim Ingold calls the "meshwork of things" ("Toward an Ecology" 437).

Taussig is fascinated by the specific materiality of things. He proposes an ecology of things, foregrounding the affective relation between things and humans. In the following quote, he talks about the digging of gold, which takes center stage in *My Cocaine Museum*:

> it could also mean that the language of stories is the language of things, with a twist. And this twist is that the language of things is privy to the people who live day by day with those things, have been cruelly forced by circumstances of world history to work those things, and nevertheless eventually grow to regard these things with empathy, loyalty, and some fondness, even while hating them. (66)

Although Taussig mentions neither new materialism nor Bill Brown's work explicitly in his book, there seems to be a clear connection. In his 2001 article "Thing Theory," Brown not only refers to earlier work by Taussig but also holds a similar view on things and materiality: "The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation" (4).

Thinking about cocaine and coca as subject-objects, or as semi-subjects, is particularly interesting if we consider the stimulant's mind-expanding nature. Indeed, psychoactive plants such as the coca leaf, but also cocaine, not only invite us to think in terms of an ecology of things but also in terms of an ecology of mind. Ingold rephrases Andy Clark's theory of the "extended mind" as follows: "the theory postulates that the mind, far from being coextensive with the brain, routinely spills out

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into the environment" ("Toward an Ecology" 438). He adds that thanks to this "leakage of the mind," "the world becomes a kind of 'distributed mind'" (438). In fact, Ingold also insists on the leakage of *things* (438), but in the case of psychoactive plants, the question is whether *things and minds* can be neatly separated. Even if we do not all consume coca(ine), the same can be said of sugar, coffee, or tea, which are all psychoactive substances and stimulants. How could we actually think of our world without the agency of these substances on our energy levels and performance? To what extent did these substances determine world history, and should we not think "*from*" these materials instead of "*about*" them, as Ingold suggests (437)? Following Hermann Herlinghaus in this respect, "[n]arcotics were indispensable commodities and psychoactive *agents*, destined both to second the practices of colonization and subjugation, on the one hand, and become fuels of industrial civilization, on the other" (9; emphasis added). In other words, acknowledging the role of coca(ine) in the global chains of commodities should not lead us to ignore their own agency from a material perspective.

While I have enumerated several arguments why it seems contradictory to separate coca from cocaine, Davis' desire to separate the two materials is also understandable. In recent decades, not only cocaine but also the coca plant has become increasingly demonized in Colombia. For many years, the United States has financed the large-scale destruction of coca plantations through the use of the widely used herbicide glyphosate (known by its brand name Roundup). In 2006, for example, 172,000 hectares were fumigated with helicopters (Ramírez 38). Although glyphosate was declared a health risk by the World Health Organization in 2015, terrestrial fumigation continued ("Colombia Suspends"). When the rightwing president Iván Duque came to power in 2018, the use of the herbicide again increased significantly ("Colombia Coca"). Two weeks before handing over the government to the newly elected leftwing president Gustavo Petro, who had declared that he would stop fumigation during his term in office,[3] the former president bought 263,000 liters of the same herbicide from the American enterprise Del Monte Agrosciences SAS (Romero Peñuela). If Davis invites us to dissociate coca from cocaine, he does so because, in his eyes, the crusade against the coca plant is unfair and causes unnecessary damage. Moreover, this crusade limits coca to its alkaloid, while many other possible uses also exist.

3 In his first discourse to the General Assembly of the United Nations, on September 20, 2022, Gustavo Petro drew a clear parallel between the "failed war on drugs" and the destruction of the Amazonian Forest. His call to stop the war on drugs is also a call to save the plant ("Colombian President").

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Davis' article was included in a recent special issue of the OPCA (Observatorio del Patrimonio Cultural y Arqueológico)[4] from 2020, entitled "Coca as Cultural Heritage: Perspectives and Tensions in Colombia." In this issue, the editors ask if the coca leaf should be designated as national cultural heritage in Colombia. They point out that it was hard to find authors willing (and daring enough) to participate in such a controversial issue. In their words, many would have been able to contribute in a significant way, but only a few were ready to do so because the topic, "as is the case with 'cholera' or 'pandemic', is marked by death" (4). Coca is taboo. So, why is this the case?

First and foremost, cocaine can be considered to have fueled the ongoing violence in Colombia since the 1960s. While the internal armed conflict was certainly not only about cocaine, the cocaine business was used by the various parties concerned as a means to fund their activities.

Second, the taboo surrounding coca as cultural heritage might also be linked to the Greek notion of "miasma." In *My Cocaine Museum*, Taussig introduces the concept to explain the force that breaks loose when a rule of importance within the community is broken. When this happens, "all hell breaks loose as a sacred barrier has been violated and pollution issues forth" (126). Could it be that the disruptive potential of the plant is so strong that a taboo emerges, which then makes it hard to deal with the topic?[5]

There is also a third reason. While cocaine is a product derived from the coca plant, the two have been consistently dissociated in cultural discourse, especially in Colombia. According to Colombian historian Lina Britto, the reason why Colombia became so strong in drug trafficking from the 1970s onward (rather than Bolivia or Peru), is because, in Colombia, illegal trafficking was taken up by middle-class *mestizo* communities from Medellín and Bogotá. According to Britto, it is therefore unsurprising that the illegal cocaine trade had its epicenter in Colombia: "Deprived of a historical legacy and a cultural heritage that gave symbolism to coca, those pioneers of the drug traffic did not see any problem in launching themselves to the conquest of the international market of the alkaloid once it started emerging in the 70s" (14).

In other words, in Colombia the cocaine business was dissociated from the coca leaf at the same time that indigenous communities were, for decades, made invisible and marginalized by the Colombian governments. The situation was different in other Andean countries, where the coca leaf has been related to indigenous cultures since colonial times. However, this does not mean that there was no racism

4 OPCA is an independent research institute that is associated with the Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá.

5 In the broader research project *Poison, Medicine or Magic Potion* (Adriaensen), in which this article is embedded, we aim to delve more deeply into indigenous views of the plant's spiritual power and agency.

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involved: elites in Peru and Bolivia did not want to spoil their high-class reputation by trafficking a product associated with an inferior race and class. The point is that in Colombia, the middle-class *mestizos* managed to dissociate the business from the ancestral indigenous uses of the plant. For the same reason, the drug business is typically associated with the *mestizo* urban drug culture (in television series, music, or films), while the coca plant itself—with its own history and alternative uses—is often kept out of sight. In this sense, talking about the future of Colombia means building a more inclusive society and acknowledging that not only the peasant *mestizo* communities (who are the main cultivators of the plant), but also the indigenous communities have to be heard. Coming back to Britto, "the destiny of the plant is the destiny of democracy in Colombia" (15) if we understand democracy, in the editors' sense, as "a political agreement regarding the plurality and the protection of the incredible diversity of worlds of meaning and knowledges that conform the social fabric and the historical framework of the nation" (4).

So, how can the label of "cultural heritage" contribute to saving the plant, and thus Colombian democracy? The editors of OPCA's special issue propose to nuance the rather static notion of "cultural heritage" by pointing out that the coca leaf should not be considered a substantive, but rather an adjective. Their argument is that "regardless of the activism of its producers and managers, it is an attribute that is negotiated, a transaction motivated and directed to capitalize symbols rather than an essence proper of the savage state of places, objects, and practices" (Jaramillo and Salge Ferro 4). In fact, they argue that the question is not whether coca is heritage or not. Indeed, the condition for talking about heritage is not "something that preexists and thus can be discovered under the infinite layers of time, but rather something that is constructed in the social concert" (4). In this way, the editors argue that Colombia needs to recognize coca as cultural heritage. At the same time, they acknowledge that the coca leaf has no essence, and is thus not an object that can be objectified by humankind. They seem to approach Ingold's view on the properties of materials, when he states that these cannot be "identified as fixed, essential attributes of things, but are rather processual and relational. They are neither objectively determined nor subjectively imagined but practically experienced" ("Materials" 14).

However, there is a clear difference between Ingold's statement and the editors' issue. Although they do not specify what kind of heritage they speak about in either the title or the introduction, one of the contributions, written by lawyer Paula Aguirre Ospina and anthropologist David Ramírez Ramón, includes a clear defense of the coca leaf as *intangible* (in Spanish: "immaterial") cultural heritage, the aim of which is to "recognize, identify, and divulgate the cultural intangible manifestations that represent, under international standards, the cultural diversity of the human beings" (51). The authors of the article specify that according to Colombian law, the coca leaf itself cannot become *intangible cultural heritage,* as this concept is legally re-

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strained to cultural uses and practices related to an object within a living community (55). However, from the perspective of the material turn within cultural studies, reducing the plant or leaf to an intangible status seems rather problematic. The plant's agency, as a psychoactive substance, is again relegated to the domain of "nature" and separated from the cultural sphere in which it is embedded.

For now, we can conclude that the coca leaf and cocaine are both things and materials that are closely intertwined. They serve as important materials of spiritual, indigenous cultures, but have also been decisive in local and global cultures of drug consumption, and in this respect, they seem to have led to different cultural expressions. However, as materials themselves, they have also been invested with cultural meanings and prejudices, which have necessarily affected legislation, trade, and power dynamics. While coca and cocaine have been studied mainly as commodities, future research should delve more into their status as semi-subjects and especially their agency within the expanded-mind theory. How can we perceive the impact, not only of coca and cocaine *as matter* but also as *psychoactive substances?* Indeed, we must go beyond studying their role within chains of commodities and networks or their status as "intangible cultural heritage" within Andean communities. If we want to understand and bring together the "two faces" and the "double history" of coca (Britto 9), we need to turn to the material properties of the plant as a substance and its psychoactive force within the *meshwork of things*.

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