Notes on contemporary uses of peyote[1]

Review of LABATE, Beatriz Caiuby and CANVAR, Clancy (eds.) 2016. *Peyote: history, tradition, politics and conservation*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO/Praeger Publishers, 312p.

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This book consists of an interdisciplinary collection of articles whose central theme is the peyote cactus, *Lophophora williamsii*, popularly known for its psychoactive properties and the presence of mescaline, its principal active compound, which was identified for the first time by the German pharmacologist Arthur Heffter in 1898. With its 12 chapters bringing together contributions from different areas, such as biology, ecology, history, law, anthropology, and the religious sciences, together with indigenous perspectives on the topic, the collection presents visions and approaches to peyote and at the same time explores some common and cross-cutting issues and questions.

It is difficult to estimate precisely for how long this cactus has been employed by Mexican indigenous peoples, such as the Wixitari (the Huichol), the Naay-eri (the Cora), and the Raramuri (the Tarahumara), among others,[3] but there exist traces that uses connected to its visionary and therapeutic properties date to at least almost 2000 years before the arrival of Europeans to the Americas (Rojas-Arechiga and Flores 2016: 27). Peyote was popularized beginning in the 1960's, a process propelled by the countercultural movement of those years, at which time the cactus took on an iconic character (Labate, Canvar and Dawson 2016: xvii). Contributing to this popularization was a growing interest in power plants and altered states of consciousness; the publication of books such as *The Doors of Perception* by Aldous Huxley (1954) and *The Teachings of Don Juan* by Carlos Castaneda (1968); and an interdisciplinary

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[3] For more information on the use of peyote among the Cora and the Huitchol, see the chapter by Maria Benciolini and Arthuro G. del Angel (2016).

academic interest in psychoactive plants and their visionary and therapeutic properties, which was especially marked between the years 1950 and 1970.[4]

Notwithstanding, the cactus has inhabited the Western imaginary since the beginning of colonial times. Thus the persecution and the preconceptions associated with peyote, far from having an origin in the "war on drugs," have existed for many centuries. This topic is discussed by Alexander Dawson in one of the most interesting chapters of the collection, which deals with peyote in the colonial imaginary. Challenging the idea that the association between peyote and indigeneity is "natural," Dawson underscores the instability and contested nature of significations attributed to this cactus over time, arguing that the transformation of peyote into something "totally indigenous" required a long process. According to this author, the significations of peyote in colonial society were multiple as this plant was used for diverse "mundane" purposes, being particularly appealing as a form of "magical medicine" and associated with ideas such as folk healing and superstition (2016: 52). As popular, unofficial medical practices were increasingly stigmatized and persecuted by the medical establishment, the association between peyote and ideas such as indigeneity and "traditional medicine" became more and more dominant.

Returning to more recent processes, one of the results of the popularization of peyote since the 1960's and its growing connection to "spiritual," "mystical," and "shamanic" experiences was the increase in uses of this cactus. Accordingly, there exists today a considerable range of practices involving the ritual uses of peyote that extend beyond those practiced by indigenous groups and recognized as "traditional" (Labate and Feeney, 2016: 214). Within this spectrum, one encounters ceremonies conducted by indigenous persons targeted toward the non-indigenous; peyote tours and rituals catering for tourists that visit communities close to Wirikuta, in San Luis Potosí, México; a wide gambit of spiritual ceremonies and therapies that combine elements of the Native American Church (NAC)[5] with other traditions including indigenous

[4] For less conventional approach to the subject, see the chapter by Erica Dyck in this collection which discusses the history of peyote in Canada and the Native American Church of Canada (NACC). The author describes the interesting alliance established between the leaders of this movement and international authorities in the research of psychedelics in the 1950s, which sought to legalize the ritual use of peyote by the NACC in Canada (Dyck, 2016).

[5] The establishment of the Native American Church, which can be considered the first pan-indigenous religious institution, constituted a strategy to defend peyotism. It spread among indigenous North American groups at the end of the 19th century (Soni, 2016). Its institutionalization as a church and its incorporation of Christian influences and elements side-by-side with the use of peyote as a "sacrament" reflect an attempt to present these practices as a legitimate and organized religion that might be protected by US legislation (idem). According to Varun Soni (2016),

Mexican rituals; and the use among indigenous groups that were not previously known to employ peyote (idem).

Today's expansions and diversifications of the uses of peyote point to a series of potential comparisons between the case of this cactus and a drink with Amazonian origins known popularly as *ayahuasca*.[6] Both cases deal with substances that became popular in the Western imaginary beginning in the 1960's and 1970's, and both owe their popularity to their psychoactive and visionary properties as well as their association to ideas such as "spirituality," "shamanism" and "traditional medicine." Furthermore, in both of these cases, the use of these substances continues to expand along with the growth of contemporary shamanic networks which connect members of indigenous communities, often times located in places considered remote and difficult to access, to inhabitants of large cities in the most diverse parts of the world. Within these networks circulate diverse actors, including: self-proclaimed "shamans" and indigenous leaders; "neo-shamans" and "neo-natives;" shamanic tourists; psychonauts; persons connected to New Age movements in search of self-discovery, healing, or spiritual experiences; and the simply curious.[7] Added to this, the expansion of the uses of ayahuasca as much as that of peyote has been raising debates with respect to issues that include national and international politics over the use and trafficking of drugs, human rights, and freedom of religion – debates that have provoked numerous developments and solutions.[8]

Nonetheless, there are also important differences between the expansion of the uses of ayahuasca and those of peyote. As pointed out by Beatriz C. Labate and Kevin Feeney, in the case of peyote, unlike that of *ayahuasca*, new modalities of use are still incipient and appear on a very small scale compared to uses defined as "traditional" (2016: 215). Another fundamental difference between these two cases is reflected in one of the cross-cutting issues examined throughout this collection organized by Labate and Canvar: the environmental debate connected to the importance of the preservation and conservation of peyote. Numerous chapters expose the

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NAC constitutes today the biggest native religious organization in the United States, with close to 650,000 participants.

[6] See, among others, Labate and Araújo (2004); Labate, Rose and Santos (2009).

[7] For a general discussion about the ongoing expansion of shamanisms associated with ayahuasca, see Labate and Canvar (2014). For an ethnography and case study on the emergence of contemporary shamanic networks in Brazil, see Rose (2010).

[8] For a recent discussion of the process of expansion and internationalization of *Santo Daime*, including a summary of the legal debates in many European countries and the United States, see Assis and Labate (2014).

dramatic decrease in populations of this cactus over the last few decades.[9] Threats to peyote, in both the United States and Mexico, emerge from a series of factors encompassing: predatory harvesting and harvesting undertaken with incorrect techniques; a rise in consumption among both indigenous and non-indigenous populations; national and international trafficking; and changes to the natural habitat precipitated by large-scale agricultural, cattle-ranching, and mining projects.

Another factor which must be taken into account is the rise in shamanic tourism in the region of Wirikuta, a subject discussed in the chapter by Vincent Basset. Drawing from his case study on the topic, Basset traces a relationship between shamanic tourism and both the revival of native shamanistic practices and the taking of a political role on the part of the Huichol/Wixitari (2016: 192). In this specific case study, political agency was recently prompted by an action by the Mexican government that guaranteed twenty-two concessions to the Canadian mining company First Majestic Silver for the extraction of silver within the sacred natural reserve of Wirikuta (2016: 196). Facing this threat, the strategy adopted by the Wixarica community was to open its rituals to participation by non-indigenous persons and to raise its claims to the international stage with the support of academics, environmentalists, and other sympathizers (2016: 206).

The environmental debate surrounding peyote emphasizes the importance and the urgency of thinking about how to guarantee the sustainability of this cactus within the context of the rapid degradation of its natural habitat and the rise in its consumption. Accordingly, one of the alternatives discussed in this collection is cultivation. The cultivation of peyote is presently not officially permitted, however, in the United States or Mexico (Feeney, 2016: 114). On top of this, even among the leaders of the NAC there does not exist consensus in relation to the cultivation of this plant (Prue, 2016: 138). It is important to point out that there are obvious contradictions between the fact that peyote is listed as a species that requires special environmental protection and, at the same time, classified as a prohibited drug. This state of

[9] This is occurring as much in the area of Texas known as Peyote Gardens (Trout and Terry, 2016) as in the region of Wirikuta in the desert of Real de Catorce, in San Luís Potosí (Rojas-Arechiga and Flores, 2016). Peyote is regulated internationally by means of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), which categorizes the cactus as a species at risk of becoming endangered (Labate and Feeney, 2016: 211). Furthermore, in Mexico peyote is currently classified as a plant which requires "special protection". In the United States, the NAC has already declared a "crisis of peyote" since the 1990s, owing to the difficulty in obtaining the cactus and the diminishing size of the available buttons (Feeney, 2016: 105).

affairs limits potential strategies for conservation such as cultivation, as well as research into its therapeutic potential (Labate and Feeney, 2016: 230).

A second cross-cutting theme discussed in the collection pertains to the legislation and regulation of the cactus in Mexico and the United States. While on the one hand we see throughout the volume that peyote is listed in various international drug conventions with the effect that the plant is as prohibited as the mescaline it contains, on the other we see that these countries have developed a series of mechanisms, based on the principal of freedom of religion, that protect traditional uses among indigenous groups (Labate and Feeney, 2016: 211). Legal exemptions for religious and traditional use of peyote for indigenous peoples exist in Mexico and the United States, where the debate over this theme is connected to the expansion of peyotism and of the Native American Church, the North American pan-indigenous movement born in the end of the 19th century.[10]

Since it was created, the NAC has engaged in numerous legal battles in several US states to defend its religious right to consume this plant. One of these was the case of *Employment Division v. Smith* which occurred in the state of Oregon in 1990. In this episode, the Supreme Court ruled against the granting of worker's rights to members of the NAC who were dismissed from their jobs for using peyote. This decision, which implied a significant reduction in constitutional guarantees for freedom of religion, represented a threat not only to the freedom of NAC members but to that of all minority religious groups in the United States. For this reason, the episode generated a significant mobilization of religious and civil groups in the United States (Forren, 2016). One of the repercussions of this case was the passing in 1993 of the *Religious Freedom Restoration Act* (RFRA), which represented an important step toward guaranteeing religious freedom in that country. In addition to the RFRA, the mobilization of members of the NAC in particular also led to the passing of an amendment to the *American Indian Religious*

[10] It bears mentioning that in Brazil, too, the question of the regulation of peyote use has recently been raised. The issue was brought up by the leaders of Sacred Fire of Itzachilatlan, an international spiritual organization also known as Red Road, which also considers itself a branch of the NAC. Even though the organization brings together elements of a number of traditions, indigenous as well as non-indigenous, the cosmology and practices of Sacred Fire are inspired principally by indigenous North-American groups (see Rose, 2010). However, due to the prohibition of peyote in Brazil, these practices have been undertaken with ayahuasca, a drink whose consumption has been legalized for ritualistic and religious use in that country. Drawing on this important precedent, in 2015 the Brazilian National Council on Drug Policy (Conselho Nacional de Políticas sobre Drogas, CONAD) put together a multidisciplinary workgroup (Grupo Multidisciplinar de Trabalho, GMT) to research the ritual and religious uses of peyote. However, owing to the present-day political situation in that country, these discussions have not pushed forward.

Freedom Act (AIRFA), an act from 1978 which guaranteed the preservation of the religious freedom and religious practices of native peoples.[11]

On the one hand, exemptions for the indigenous use of peyote represent an important advance within the context of prohibitionist politics and the war against drugs. On the other, there are limitations to the proposal that the consumption of peyote should be restricted to individuals who can prove their indigenous identity (Labate and Feeney, 2016; Guzmán, 2016). Even though the United States may have protections for indigenous peyotism, many indigenous groups are excluded from this legal exemption owing to the lack of recognition of some tribes on the part of the government, among other reasons (Labate and Feeney, 2016: 214). In the case of Mexico, traditional uses by mestizo populations are excluded from legal protections, along with the growing nonindigenous use connected to New Age movements, neo-shamanism, and the expansion of global shamanic tourism (Labate and Feeney, 2016: 220). We may say, therefore, that contemporary uses of peyote have a transversal and multidimensional character. As Guzman argues, the landscape of peyote's uses goes beyond ethnic and national frontiers, involving a large variety of participants at both the local and trans-local levels (2016: 245). Thus, the principal drawback of legal exemptions for uses of peyote defined as "indigenous" and "traditional," as much in the United States as in Mexico, is that such exemptions do not recognize popular mestizo usages nor the hybridity of modern-day ceremonies (Labate and Feeney, 2016: 220).

It may be concluded, in sum, that peyote today finds itself situated at a crossroads, one at which are encountered debates over environment and sustainability; national and international politics dealing with the use and trafficking of drugs; human and indigenous rights, and questions of an ethnic and religious nature (Labate and Feeney, 2016: 237). In this sense, one of the discussions raised in many different ways throughout this book is over how these diverse interests interact with one another and how they might be suitably balanced (idem.).

[11] The amendment, approved in 1994, addresses specifically the religious use of peyote, drawing attention to the role played by this cactus as a religious sacrament for many indigenous peoples and its importance to the way of life and perpetuation of their cultures (Prue, 2016: 136). This amendment determined that the use, possession, and transport of peyote by indigenous persons who employ the cactus in a traditional manner and for bona fide religious and ceremonial purposes should not be prohibited (idem.).

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