Cannabis Capitalism in Colorado: An Ethnography of Il/legal Production and Consumption

Lia Berman
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Cannabis Capitalism in Colorado: An Ethnography of Il/legal Production and Consumption

by

Lia Berman

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Anthropology
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

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ABSTRACT

Coloradans have changed their fundamental views on illegal substances since the decriminalization of cannabis in Colorado. Since the legalization of medical cannabis in 2014, state-sold dispensary cannabis products have straddled the line between legal and illegal network systems in a hybridized “il/legal” market system, a term designed to be ambiguous of the formal and informal economies that it represents (Nordstrom 2007, xxvii). The cannabis commodity chain has proved both familiar and strange when it comes to its production, consumption, and distribution of a federally illegal substance. Colorado’s history as a pioneer in culture and legislature has been repeated with cannabis legalization and provides a unique experience that cannot be replicated, drawing in tourists who produce income for the state. This il/legal experimentation will both prove vital in finding the market homeostasis of cannabis nationwide, but also, to see how Colorado’s unique cannabis regulatory system affects this specific population’s socio-economic lifeway. This dissertation focuses on ethnographic research from the perspective of the Colorado dispensary “budtender,” an ambiguous role that has taken on different value-meanings depending on the state, system, and context, and it explores how these workers conceptualize their role in the cannabis commodity chain. Ethnographic methods proposed in this study lend well in explaining the relationship between regulation, tourism, and civil society, as well as documenting the transitionary period of Colorado history. This dissertation contributes to the literature by providing an ethnographic account of how budtenders navigate a newly formed economic sector and provides a starting point to collaborate with agencies to find practical solutions to the hardships workers face in the cannabis industry.
CHAPTER ONE:
INTRODUCTION

The Green Mile, located on South Broadway Boulevard in Englewood, Colorado, is famed to have more dispensaries per square mile than anywhere in the world (Peterson 2017). Once known as “Antique Row” due to its previous concentration of quaint antique shops, it has not only become the epitome of the proliferation of cannabis capitalism in Colorado but also serves as a visual representation of market-led gentrification since cannabis legalization. Antique’s row might still be that sleepy, laid-back street if Colorado had not passed Ballot Amendment 20, which was approved on November 7th, 2000, with 54 percent of the vote. This ballot amendment removed all penalties on cannabis cultivation and possession for Colorado citizens, assuming they could provide a documented recommendation from a physician stating they suffered from a debilitating medical condition (Dohr 2012). Though cannabis had been officially decriminalized in 1975 with no penalties for possession of an ounce of cannabis or less, this was a leap into the unknown as it included cultivation within its parameters and increased possession from one to two ounces for medical patients.

After the “experiment” of Amendment 20 was proved successful in the eyes of the state, Colorado voters took the next big leap forward and approved the use of recreational cannabis on November 6th, 2012, with the passing of constitutional Amendment 64 that had 55 percent of votes in favor, followed by the first cannabis retail shop in September of 2013 (Hudak 2016, 156; Amendment 64). The constitutional amendment allowed the sale of cannabis both within a retail environment, as well as one’s own cultivation with up to six plants legally for any resident of the state of Colorado. Not without contention from the public, Colorado’s Legislature provided various arguments for allowing personal possession and consumption. First, Colorado citizens believed that marijuana was an inefficient
use of law enforcement resources; second, the state looked to capture the revenue for new and existing
cultural, economic, and physical landscape of Colorado changed. Colorado Cannabis has brought in billions of dollars into the state since legalization with over $2,280,000 Billion in medical and recreational sales just in the year 2020 alone (CDOR 2021; Leafly Jobs Report 2021). Along with the money and international fame, the state has seen a burgeoning number of tourists, as well as “marijuana migrants” flooding the state, causing increased housing and living costs. Market-led holidays and social events, such as the April 20th international cannabis day, colloquially called 4/20, The city of Denver has had an especially difficult time keeping up with the rising populations, with such a large influx of people moving into the capital city, combined with a lack of multi-family housing units, the city of Denver has become the number one most competitive place in the nation to buy a home as of 2019 (Martin 2019).

The growing pains of the ever-expanding cannabis industry have provided residents and workers with unforeseen negative consequences that seem to be accumulating. Families and businesses complain of the rising living costs, increased traffic, and low living wages that never seem to make ends meet in such an expensive bustling city. To make matters more confusing, some counties declined altogether to legalize cannabis dispensaries, leaving the state to become a patchwork of dispensary-rich and dispensary-absent counties, unequally affecting poorer neighborhoods.

Furthermore, perhaps the worst hit are the low-wage laborers working in the cannabis industry itself. Colorado employees 35,539 cannabis jobs within state lines as of 2021 (Leafly Jobs Report 2021). These workers help facilitate over $350 million dollars in state revenue annually in the form of taxation from 2.28 billion dollars of cannabis sales (Leafly Jobs Report 2021). These workers have few legal and health protections, yet due to the popularity of position within a hybrid il/legalized country, their positions are often thought of as replaceable labor. These developments have left native Coloradans to question the
cost-benefit analysis of the legal cannabis commodity market and have led to further reflections on how cannabis legalization has changed the cultural landscape of their daily lived experience.

This study seeks to uncover the fluctuating relationship between the state, economy, and civil society in Colorado during the transition from “illegal marijuana” into “recreational cannabis” and the subsequent changes this economic transformation has had on social relations, labor markets, and the state’s authority. By employing materialist theories of economic market systems in combination with commodity chain analysis, this dissertation seeks to address the political economy of cannabis legalization, tracing the commodity through various economic frameworks and revealing changed labor relationships that accompany these transitions. A political economy of consumption must inherently take into consideration the commodity chains (sometimes referred to as provision chains) in which objects are both embedded and transformative (Fine 2002; Narotzky 2012; Carrier 2012; Miller 1993). I hope to merge both the anthropological interest in consumption and provisioning systems with studies on commodity chain analysis through a political-economic lens (Carrier and Heyman 1997). These intricate relationships will come to the forefront in this dissertation as documentation of the changing industry, and alongside it, takes on differing perceived roles of the position of the cannabis budtender as it moves toward a federally legal capitalist system.

The vast majority of social science research on the cannabis industry has focused on efforts of decriminalization or health benefits. To date, no anthropological ethnography has looked specifically at the changing role of budtenders in legal cannabis markets within the United States, nor has a study been produced that traces the distinct differences between budtenders in the medical market and recreational market in Colorado. Previous research has largely overlooked the role of these individuals in the creation of value of the cannabis commodity itself, as well as the challenges associated with navigating an il/legal, newly formed market system as a low-wage laborer.

In the present study, I highlight the key differences between legal and illegal markets and also propose a framework for understanding the specific brand of Colorado Cannabis Capitalism. This dissertation hopes to address critical questions regarding Cannabis in Colorado, namely: What were the
historical and legislative decisions that led to this moment in history in Colorado? What is the history of human cannabis consumption, and how has that changed with the commodification of legal cannabis? How has legal cannabis disrupted previous production and consumption flow of cannabis? What makes Colorado cannabis unique as a market system? What is the nature of the cannabis commodity chain in Colorado? What is the history of human cannabis consumption, and how has that changed with the commodification of legal cannabis? What makes people choose Colorado as a cannabis tourist, and how is cannabis consumed in the tourist setting? How have actors within the industry negotiated their roles between legal and possibly illegal commodity chains? What have been some of the social consequences, intended and unintended, of the advent of the legal cannabis industry in Colorado? It is my intention that the following pages will uncover some of the answers to these complex questions. I attempt to answer these rather large questions here with an ethnographic focus on the “budtender,” the frontline worker in the cannabis industry as a kind of endpoint of the cannabis commodity chain production and distribution system.

To conclude, this study gives an ethnographic account of how individuals work from within il/legal networks in Colorado and how institutions navigate transient boundaries that eventually become solidified in practice. It also provides an overview of what makes the Colorado cannabis industry culturally distinct from other cannabis markets and examines the relationship between cannabis culture and tourism as a commodity itself within the cannabis capitalist market.

History: Denver, Colorado

Pioneers on the Frontier

Cannabis is quasi-legal in many states and countries, but none of the frameworks are exactly alike. This creates a collage of standards and practices for experimentation before solidifying laws federally. But how and why is each industry different from the next? Why doesn’t a one-size-fit-all cannabis economy work on a large scale? In this chapter, an analysis of the historical data through an
interpretive lens is provided, showing the significance of certain historical processes and events for the contemporary cannabis industry. In part, the holistic nature of space and place, combined with the cultural environment in which a commodity becomes legalized, greatly affects its regulation and consumption. Colorado has a unique perspective on legalization due to its historical record, which includes themes of new frontiers, self-sufficiency, freedom, and fearlessness in experimentation. This “wild west” cultural history has been ingrained as a state ideology and is enculturated into citizens in various forms of state pride propaganda.

This imagined community of “Coloradans as pioneers” in culture and industry has led it to be one of the first states in the West to legalize cannabis. This section provides a historical context to the pioneering history of Colorado as a state, weaving together the socio-political upbringing of the state into the union and beyond through industrialization. This chapter also seeks to address the research question of historical and legislative decisions in Colorado history that have made cannabis legalization a possibility in the present day. By analyzing past historical political processes, it becomes clear that Colorado has always been at the forefront of national decision-making and has proven itself as a leader in legislative experimentation, both past, and present.

When looking into the historical foundations of Colorado, one can draw parallels to the current economic “green” boom, as well as further understand Colorado’s unique place within the United States. To those familiar with Colorado’s history, it’s no surprise that the “wild west” state was among the first to test the limits of cannabis legalization. Colorado’s unique historical position as both a legislative rebel, accompanied by its strong foundation in tourism infrastructure, lends well to the promotion of cannabis tourism.

The Gold Rush

The attraction to move “out West” for residents of the eastern states was fueled by the tales of Lewis and Clark and other popular stories told by pioneers, traders, and exploration travel journals. The fantasy of life out West was consumed and circulated; myths of the unknown natural wilderness, exotic
animals like bison and jackrabbits, and tales of lawless trappers and crazed mountain men were common western archetypes. Artwork was also created and consumed during this period; the artwork depicted untouched paradise, fresh mountain streams, and wide-open spaces that caught the imaginations of those that had never seen such flora and fauna. The American West incorporated idealized versions of “American values” that came to later define the nation: “rugged individualism,” tenacity, work ethic, and the ability to overcome hardships. These characterized the romanticized lifestyle of the early settlers, frontiersmen, women, trappers, miners, and prospectors.

Americans were faced with a conundrum, they could either stay on the east coast and get caught up with the uncertainly and violence stemming from the Civil War, or head west and face criminal lawlessness, and bands of “savage murders” in hopes of hitting it big in the gold mines. On top of that, moving west could only be accomplished by horse and buggy, with many dying along the journey from starvation and illness. Those that did make past the Mississippi would settle along trade routes, often stopping somewhere before the Rocky Mountains. Women heading to Colorado had to be strong, smart, and cunning. Many women were single, or widows, and were tasked with taking on both gender roles for survival. The early history of Denver depicts paintings of settlers and Native Americans living near each other in this area, trading somewhat-peacefully for decades before gold was discovered in Cherry Creek along the Platte River in June of 1850. The presence of gold as a form of monetary wealth would change the ethnic landscape moving forward.

The gold rush changed Denver’s image from a small trade town, to a bustling attraction, into a prominent strong nexus point of east-to-west trade in a matter of decades. Anyone heading over the Rocky Mountains often had to go through Denver first. Mining of minerals, like gold and silver, brought in a significant amount of financial capital to the city, which fueled a rapid population boom. News spread of the discovery of gold in the mountains in the 1860s, and in a matter of a few months, 100,000 gold migrants pounced on the state enticed by images of hitting it rich. During this time, Colorado attracted a wide range of populations all heading west to strike it rich: individuals looking to escape their past, women, people of color, petty criminals, and murderers all passed through Denver heading west.
Denver was known as a town “where the west came to play” due to the low levels of regulation, and the town was known for its gambling, brothels, and drug use (History Colorado Center 2017; Colorado Experience 2015).

**Western Commodity Trade**

Throughout Colorado history, a variety of salacious commodities were traded right alongside the highly sought-after gold and precious minerals. Whisky was especially important for frontier pioneers as it was used as a social, economic, and medical commodity. It could be used to trade commodities with any population, including Native Americans, and of course as part of social gatherings such as in the swapping of stories and advice in the various saloons. In addition, it was used as a topical analgesic for treating wounds and illnesses and was even used for pain management. Cocaine leaves were also popular in Colorado, having come from the Spanish traveling up from South America. Coloradans would use the powdered form as medicine for muscle aches or toothaches, and it was seen as a panacea with positive properties for many forms of illness. The 1800s also saw a young Adolf Coors come from Germany to Denver, and then to Golden, in the hopes of making clean beer from mountain spring water. He sold each glass of beer for a nickel at the Rocky Mountain Brewery (later named Coors Brewery) to the miners heading into the mountains. Coors was an early adopter of beer bottling, which allowed mountaineers to travel with beer over the bumpy terrain. He would later famously survive the Prohibition era by diversifying his own commodities, which allowed him to returned even wealthier after the end of Prohibition.

While the men drank in public at the saloons or breweries, women drank at home by themselves. Not whiskey or beer, but a variety of tinctures, bitters, and elixirs were common sipping partners to females who had followed their husbands out west. Tonics often included opium, morphine, cannabis, and cocaine, and were approved for the whole household; in many cases, teething children were subject to the tinctures, as well as restless children, and the children of working single mothers who needed a liquid “babysitter” for a few hours during the day. It is estimated that during this time, almost 70 percent of
women were consuming some form of “medicine” regularly. (History Colorado Center 2017; Colorado Experience 2015; Lee 2012).

During the 1800’s Cannabis tinctures were mostly used for pain, but other medicinal products started to replace cannabis tinctures as cannabis is insoluble in water, proving difficult to create a form that could be quickly injected (Booth 2015). Furthermore, cannabis became unpopular with producers of medical tinctures as the product would separate on the shelf of an apothecary, showing different colored residue sticking to the bottom of the tincture bottles. This separation caused medical issues with consumers as well, as patients would commonly overdose when getting to the concentrated cannabis that had fallen to the bottom of the bottle (Booth 2015, 117.). Coloradans had a hard time dosing cannabis tinctures in bottles (which is still a concern today) and were replaced by other pain medications on the shelves, notably aspirin (Booth 2015).

Cannabis was rarely, if ever, smoked by Anglo populations in America in the 1800s and was strictly referred to as cannabis, not marijuana. It was mostly used in tinctures, oils, and edibles, and grew in popularity among specific micro-communities over the next century (Antique Cannabis Book 2016). One especially popular product included Gunjah Wallah Hasheesh Candy, which could be purchased via mail order magazines by wealthy Denverites (Lee 2012, 37). In the 1850s, Tilden and Co. become the first company to package and market “Cannabis Indica” hashish in both solid and liquid forms (Lee 2012, 32). These products could be carried over in wagons, like the newly bottled beer, and made their way to the shelves across the west.

**Women as Political Trailblazers**

Women in Colorado were pioneers themselves, and they started to campaign for their right to vote comparatively early to other states, starting in the 1870s. Women’s suffrage in Colorado started with Albino Washburn, a young teacher in Loveland who wanted to vote. The myth begins with young Washburn entering the local post office looking to vote, and when she was turned away, she pulled out her dictionary and looked up the word “citizen.” She proceeded to read out loud the definition to all inside
and argued that the definition did not, in fact, include gender, and was granted local voting rights in 1872. This incidence, however, was not widely adopted among all municipalities in Colorado, and so, other prominent females began to push for gender equality.

Ellis Meredith was an influential writer who wrote articles in the Rocky Mountain News arguing for women’s suffrage. After being told by Susan B. Anthony that Colorado men were “ignorant trash” and to stop wasting her time, Meredith tried a variety of techniques in her articles. Some of her articles used simple economic logic to prove her point, as in the case with female property taxes, others tried to lift up the female image by writing about powerful historical females like Cleopatra and the Queens of Europe. Meredith would end one of her articles on famous female Queens with a cheeky note: “isn’t it interesting here in the United States women can’t even vote” and “let the women vote, they can’t do worse than the men have” (Ellis 2015). Ellis Meredith’s articles were on the forefront of cultural history, while putting many of the male egos in place, and spawned the Colorado Antelope, a female-owned newspaper that was created in 1879, named for the only animal in the region that no other could outrun.

Elizabeth Ensley, an equally prominent figure in the suffrage movement, had an additional obstacle as she was an African American. Ensley was drawn to the west due to its image of being accepting of people of color, hoping that racial inequality hadn’t taken hold of the region just yet. Ensley was a master fundraiser and entrepreneur and stood as treasurer for the suffrage movement in Denver. Equality meant equal rights of all, including African American women, which was an enormous motivation for women from different classes and ethnicities to work together to merge their numbers and funds. In 1893, after a long battle for women’s rights, Colorado passed a grant voting for women’s rights with a 2.3 percent majority vote made by a population of all male voters. In the same year, Katherine Lee Bates wrote “America the Beautiful” on top of Pike’s Peak, which would later go on to be one of America’s most treasured national songs.

On the ballot shortly thereafter, in 1894, three women were the first women to be voted into a legislative body, even though nationally, women did not have the right to vote until almost 25 years later. Colorado’s neighbors, Wyoming and Utah, technically voted first on women’s suffrage, but Colorado was
the first state to pass the legislation with a single-issue vote. The women elected served as “evidence” for the national arena and often were asked to give their advice and talk to prominent politicians in Washington, DC about their experience. To this day, 42 percent of the legislative body in Colorado are women, more than twice the national average. However, women are still missing from higher levels of power, as the state has yet to see a woman mayor in its history. Though Colorado has the highest percentage of women elected to any state legislature, many do not know the history that led to such a cultural shift. (Beaton 2012; Rocky Mountain PBS 2015)

**From Boom to Bust: The Emergence of Early Tourism**

During this time, some of the most notable architectural buildings were starting to take shape, like the landmark building of Union Station, a central railway station for the four train stops within city limits. The building was constructed in 1880 by the Union Pacific Railroad but had to be constantly torn down and rebuilt to accommodate the growing population that seemed to double every decade. Rail traffic had increased by this time, and more tourists made it to the city by rail. As an act of goodwill, Mayor Robert Speer erected a large ironclad arch that read “Welcome” on both sides. After its initial use, people began to talk about the negative message it sent people leaving the city as if to say, “We are welcoming you to leave.” After a long discussion amongst influential people, the city listened and changed one side to read the Hebrew word "MIZPAH," taken from Genesis 31:49, which says, “May the Lord keep watch between you and me when we are away from each other.” The arch was a point of pride for the city, and with the advent of electricity shortly after, the arch was lit up in lights during the holiday season. Once the Great Depression hit, the arch was in disrepair with no funding. The advent of the automobile to Denver’s streets further complicated matters as railway travel became an outdated mode of travel, and the city decided to remove the sign altogether in 1931. Old photographs and newly made signs that read MIZPAH can still be seen in various bars and restaurants in downtown Denver.

Another architectural rival of the time was the State Building that took 18 years to plan and build and would become the scene of the state's largest public cannabis celebration. The building commenced
in 1908 and included an impressive gold-plated dome in a renaissance revival architectural style and sat westward atop a hill overlooking the mountain range. The original idea was to make the area feel less urban and more like a park, so the surrounding area was turned into a series of promenade gardens. The gardens eventually turned into what is known as Civic Center Park and included lush gardens with fountains, a Greek amphitheater for concerts and meetings, and a memorial site depicting early pioneer artwork by Allen Tru. The State Building and Civic Center Park served as an open-air plaza where citizens could enjoy a sense of “culture” and “civilization” that many found lacking in the west during the time.

In and around the State Capital, various hotels started popping up that could house a great number of tourists and offer them modern-day comforts, such as electricity, that had yet found their way to many areas of the west. The Brown Palace, built in 1888, was built from red Colorado granite and held true to Colorado’s history of merging the natural wilderness and industry, as evidenced by architectural details such as stone carvings of Colorado animals, cast-iron railings, and 400 guest rooms. As a finale, the entire building was made not of wood, but terracotta blocks, allowing the entire buildings to be completely fireproof, a large concern due to the arid weather. This was unheard of during this period, and in fact, was only the second building in the nation to be fully fireproof at that time. The Brown Palace remains a symbol of opulence and style, just as it was when it was first built. (Brown Palace Hotel 2021)

Tourism and the “Western Experience”

Colorado had become known for its health tourism during much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Due to the area’s high altitude and dry air, moving to Colorado was often “prescribed” by physicians for various ills, including particularly respiratory problems, lung infections, and tuberculosis. Medical retreats inspired wealthy business owners from the east to settle in Denver after treatment in the mountain air. Before the Stanley Hotel, the inspiration for writer Stephen King’s 1977 bestseller The Shining and a 1980 film of the same name, it was the late great vacation home of Freelan Oscar Stanley, of the Stanley Steamer fortune (King 1977). After surviving tuberculosis later in his life by moving him
and his wife to the mountains of Estes Park from the east coast in 1903, his love for Colorado and the outdoor lifestyle inspired him to build a magnificent hotel that would cater to his friends from back home in New England. Stanley, who had no heirs, poured his fortune into the large white hotel built from a Georgian Colonial Revival in the valley of Rocky Mountain National Park in 1903.

Stanley was also a pioneer in the entrepreneurial spirits of Denverites and invented steamer cars that would bus tourists from Denver up and through the winding roads into the valley. Roads outside of downtown still did not yet exist, and so Stanley was forced to create modes of transportation through the mountains that tourists would enjoy. Stanley enjoyed the wild west trope and even was an entrepreneurial pioneer in the tourist industry by creating experiences for tourists early on. For instance, while tourists were being steamed up the mountain, he would have a man in a bear suit stumble out from the scenery, while doing so, the driver of the steam car would pull out a gun and theatrically “shoot” the bear in a heroic gesture of man-over-nature. This gave the tourists a first look at what “Colorado wildlife” had to offer, and remained a ploy for many years. The joke was kept secret from even the staff who worked at the hotel, and hotel guests continued to believe the experience was real. Tourist experiences like this made Colorado a global destination at the time and showcased the dichotomy of natural surroundings and entrepreneurial industry that identified the American wilderness experience. (Rocky Mountain PBS 2016)

As mid-twentieth-century Colorado tourism continued to blossom, skiing became a popular new sport for the elite few and continues to be one of the main reasons people choose Colorado as a cannabis tourist destination. In 1941, the US Army created the 10th Mountain Division at Camp Hale in Leadville, Colorado, which established the government's “military on skis.” Men would be put through rigorous high-altitude survival techniques and cold weather training for WWII defense along Italy’s Apennine Mountains. These troops would be the predecessors of ski tourism, as many returned and set up ski resorts of their own. Ski towns like Aspen, Breckenridge, Vail, Crested Butte, and Steamboat Springs started to solidify during this era from soldiers who returned to the state. These ski towns and resorts continued to dominate the tourism sector with the progression from ski hills, to added lifts, lighted runs, and lodging.
The invention and adoption of the snowboard also increased interest in mountain tourism in new generations after the 1970s.

**Contemporary Tourism Economy**

In terms of geography, Colorado is comprised of various natural environments which people solely rely on for economic stability. The “untamed wilderness” within the parks continues to draw tourists into the state, as it did in its previous history, as an added benefit of recreational activity along with recreational cannabis. The state has had a long tradition of supporting access to natural resources for recreation and as part of the environmental conservation and protection movement. The central portion of the state is comprised of the Rocky Mountains with the eastern slope of the range locally referred to as the “Front Range.” The Front Range comprises various large cities on the eastern slope (east of the continental divide) that fall on the “gateway to the Rocky Mountains.” The mountain range itself consists of various small mountain towns amongst dense forests and national parks that rely on tourism and mining for their economic income. The state ranks fourth in the most national parks with its four parks, including Rocky Mountain (mountains, wildlife), Mesa Verde (archeological site of ancient Native American cliff dwellings), Black Canyon of the Gunnison (dinosaurs), and the Great Sand Dunes (sand dunes). The parks attract tourism in the winter through winter mountain sports such as skiing and snowboarding, while in the summer, tourist areas advertise hiking and biking, as professional athletes flock to the mountains to train at high altitudes on the trails. The federal government also has high stakes in Colorado with the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), the United States Air Force Academy, and the Denver Mint.

Areas that do not fall within national park boundaries are often marketed for ecological and environmental tourism. Mountain towns are known to be “playgrounds for the elite,” including well-known enclaves such as Aspen and Vail, which were founded by the influential 10th Mountain Division in the mid-century. Of the 45 ski areas in the state, skiing alone brings in 13 million visits annually (Colorado Office of Economic Trade and Development 2016). For those who do not speed down the
mountains, Colorado has over 500 heritage tourism sites, from old cowboy ghost towns to incredible scenic views. Colorado Springs has especially become a place on the map for those interested in evangelical Mega Churches, with New Life Church, and Flatirons Church, grossing over 10,000 members each. Regardless of tourist hobbies and interests, 85 million people show up each year and spend $24.2 billion annually on these vacation outings, which generate roughly $1 billion in state and local taxes (Colorado Office of Economic Trade and Development 2016).

**Current Demographics**

Colorado’s current total population sits just under six million people spread out among roughly 100,000 square miles of land. The state is overwhelmingly Caucasian, with 86.9 percent claiming racial origins as “White” (White alone 67.7, Hispanic 21.8). Black Coloradans make up 4.6 percent of the population, and American Indian’s come in as the third-largest racial population at 1.6 percent (U.S. Census Bureau 2013 & 2019). Out of all of the states, Colorado was ranked number one for labor supply, the second-fastest growing state, it was named the most active state, and it was the third most-educated state (Forbes 2015). The state is often called a political “purple” state due to the large Republican-leaning rural farming community that makes up a large portion of the state mixed with the highly-educated cities that tend to vote Democrat. Denver is the capital city of the state and is the largest city within a 600-mile radius. Denver has enjoyed the spoils of being a major economic hub for the central United States. The official population, according to the census, is 716,621 inside the city limits. However, Denver’s large surrounding suburbs create a more accurate population of the Denver Metro Area at around 2,827,000 people. Sitting at a “mile-high” in altitude, the connections to the climate and elevation are a central theme in the state’s cultural history.

Denver has a unique demographic that may have aided the legalization of cannabis within its borders. Denver enjoys many national titles, including the most educated city in the United States with over 38.3% of the population holding a bachelor’s degree, the most health-conscious city in America (tied with Honolulu) with the lowest obesity rate, and one of the sunniest with over 300 days of sunshine a
year, beating the number of days of sunshine for Tampa, Florida (U.S. Census Bureau 2019). Demographically the state is homogenous and wealthy, with 73.8% claiming European ancestry and a $20,000 higher than the national average median household income (Metro Denver 2016). The median property value sits at 425,100, and the poverty rate within the city itself is 13.8 percent. Since legalization, marijuana arrests in Colorado have dropped from 39,00 annually to 2,000 annually, keeping citizens out of jail and decreased the risk of falling into poverty traps that impact education, housing, health care, and voting privileges (Hudak 2016, 184).

**Cannabis Use in Colorado: Normative and Subculture Consumption**

Cannabis is widely consumed by the US public; 41 million people in the United States self-identify as being frequent cannabis consumers, and over 54% of the overall population have at least tried marijuana at some point in their lives (Caulkins et al. 2016, 26; Seleh 2016; Galston 2013, 9). The “wild west of weed” consumes on average 2 percent more cannabis than the rest of the country (Caulkins et al. 2016, 26). As of 2015, Colorado holds the highest rate of youths (12-17 yrs.) who smoke in America, up from fourth place in 2011(Caulkins et al. 2016, 225). Teenagers in Colorado currently make up 20 percent of the overall consumer market despite their demographic being outside the realm of legal sales (Caulkins et al. 2016, 141). These statistics point to a normative behavior approach that shows how cannabis, like alcohol, has become a feature of current culture in general, whereas most other illicit drugs in history have been associated with micro-communities that operate within social pockets or subcultures (Potter et al. 2013a, 2013b, 3).

The distinction exists between a normative marijuana user in a general term, which is roughly defined as an individual who smokes less than 12 days annually, and also a specific sub-culture of heavy use consumers who actively enjoy cannabis clubs, societies, campaign groups, and festivals from around the world (Caulkins et al. 2016, 26; Potter et al. 2013b, 3). As of 2015, Colorado had over 909,000 total users who smoke annually, but not all of these users account for profits in the dispensaries (Ingold 2016). Dispensaries look to increase consumption of current recreational users as well as the 30% of users in
Colorado who are categorized as “heavy cannabis users.” Direct marketing to heavy users is a phenomenon that has been replicated in a variety of markets like alcohol, tobacco, and gambling, causing negative social consequences for society (Hudak 2016, 175-177).

This short political and economic history of Denver and the state of Colorado has set the scene for what follows in the dissertation. It has allowed us to understand forces and cultural trends in history that help account for the advent of legal cannabis in Colorado. Denver’s historic population boom due to the Gold Rush encouraged migrants to venture the perilous trails out west in search of riches and freedom, an archetype still enculturated into the state’s cultural identity and readily apparent in the new “Green” Rush. It has also provided information on Colorado’s demographics in terms of ethnicity and class. Further, this chapter has set the scene for us to understand the development of cannabis in relation to what has become “cannabis tourism” in the context of the development of tourism in Colorado and especially how tourism is related to particular appropriations of nature.

What is Cannabis?

Cannabis has been highly documented in the historical record by almost every major civilization in some way or form. The history of cannabis and its commodified forms directly connects to cannabis research in Colorado because it helps explain how Colorado cannabis has transformed from a plant into a commodity, as well as how the production of cannabis commodities has disrupted previous production and consumption flows. Much of the perplexity of what cannabis is, and why it is illegal, stems from confusion from linguistic terms and cannabis’ various forms. This chapter seeks to give the reader an understanding of what cannabis is, and what it is not, to help clarify cannabis as a commodity and explores how the anatomy of the cannabis plant dictates its commodification. This chapter also illuminates how cannabis has been commodified and circulated alongside political movements to uncover the negotiated roles between legal and illegal cannabis.
Historical Linguistics

The review of the literature on the linguistic history of cannabis suggests that, prior to 1900, the term “marijuana” was not used in circulation in the Americas (Lee 2012). It wasn’t until after the Mexican-American War (1846-48) that the term marijuana (antiquated spelling “marihuana”) was adopted. The term marijuana itself has mysterious linguistic origins. Current theories in the literature suggest marijuana stems from the Portuguese word for intoxicant, Mariguango, while others hypothesize its origins from the Aztec Indian phrase Mallihuan. Scholars have also made the connection to the Mexican military phrase “Maria y Juana,” an idiom meaning prostitute or brother (Lee 2012, 15; Booth 2015, 158). For many, marijuana is still an unpopular term for referring to cannabis as some claim that the term marijuana is “the evil twin of cannabis” (Lee 2012, 510).

The “father of botany” Carl Linneaus first classified cannabis in 1753 under the botanical group Cannabaceae (which includes hops) with the phylogenic term: Cannabis sativa (cannabis means “cultivated”) (Lee 2012, 23; Booth 2015, 2). Cannabis’ linguistic roots have been traced back to the Sanskrit word for cane, cana. Later, the Greeks would adopt this root and turn it into the form of Kannabis. The ending syllable of “bis” is traced to the Aramaic term Busma (mentioned in the Old Testament), meaning aromatic or fragrant (Booth 2015, 2; Lee 2012, 5). Both terms together thus create the linguistic word Cana-bis, “the fragrant cane” (Booth 2015, 2). The term associated with the resin of the cannabis plant, Kif (Kief), comes from the Arabic/Turkish word for pleasure, as the Qur’an forbids alcohol, but does not mention cannabis (Caulkins, Kilmer, and Kleiman 2016, 20).

Botany and Classification

Cannabis is officially classified as an herbaceous heliotrope with dioecious (female/male/hermaphrodite) reproduction under the botanic nomenclature of Cannabaceae (Booth 2015, 2). The plant has serrated or palmate leaves with fertilized female plants growing flower clusters after 1-2 months. Female plants are pollinated by male plants, but for retail cannabis production, unfertilized female plants produce higher amounts of psychoactive chemicals. Female plants produce glandular hairs
called trichomes on their flowers which are encapsulated in an amber resin (Booth 2015, 4; Backes, 2014). During the growing process in female plants, the resin produced on the plant's trichome turns from clear to amber when maturity is reached, indicating the synthesis of the compounded molecule Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). THC is found mostly in the flowers of the female cannabis plant during maturity, with minimal levels in the stalks and leaves of the plant. THC breaks down in organic plant material both over time as well as when exposed to heat, rendering a window for consumption. Cannabis can grow in a variety of environments and altitudes (up to 8,000 feet above sea level) and can reproduce in poor soil, sand, or marsh and is often found growing wild. Its total life cycle can be accomplished in as little as three months, aiding the production process of commodities made from the material (Booth 2015; Backes 2014).

Under the genus of Cannabis lies further confusion as to the number of species that make up the genus. Jean-Baptiste Lamarck was the first to officially subcategorize species within the genus cannabis, a classification that would have resounding effects on the marketing and production of cannabis in the legal market (Booth 2015). Working off the work of Carl Linnaeus, Lamarck began to formalize the binomial nomenclature system and differentiated two species under the genus Cannabis. Cannabis sativa became the European version of the plant, and Cannabis indica, referred to Indian produced cannabis. Though sativa and indica are within the same genus, the differences can be found in the height and shape of the plant as sativa grows taller and more “tree-like” (up to 6 meters), while indica displays a shorter appearance (1 meter) that looks more “bush-like.”

Differences also extend to the user’s experience. Cannabis sativa strains are said to be more cerebral and energetic when consumed, and Cannabis indica strains are more cathartic and relaxing (Backes 2014). There are many cultural idioms in existence to explain the difference, including “Sativa gets you high, India gets you stoned” or indica, meaning “in-da-couch” (Hudak 2016, 12). Later still, a Russian botanist in the early 1900’s claimed a third classification, Cannabis ruderalis. Ruderalis is a small plant that grows up to 3/4 of a meter with mysterious origins thought to perhaps originate somewhere in central Asia (Booth 2015,
Ruderalis is rarely spoken about and is not sold currently within cannabis markets. Nevertheless, the differences between all species have become less and less important as cross-breeding hybrid strains are now the norm among plant geneticists. Currently, cannabis genes are being sliced and combined to create strains with specific “cannabis profiles.” These profiles include the strength of various psychoactive components, as well as chemical terpenes, the chemical compounds that create flavor profiles, to increase value within the cannabis commodities. Consumers are always looking for the next best strain within the industry, and the industry is constantly on the edges of technology to provide it for them.

**Hemp vs. Cannabis**

The differences between hemp and cannabis are often confused. Cannabis rumors are often circulated on unfounded scientific information due to the plant’s illegality, but in fact, cannabis and hemp are the same plant from the same genus, Cannabis sativa. In the New World, the Anglo-Saxon tradition led Americans to refer to the commodity form of cannabis as hemp, coming from henep/haenep, to describe the use-value of industrial products extracted from cannabis (Lee 2012, 6). Use-value cannabis (hemp) contains less than .3 percent THC as dictated by US law, while consumable cannabis has THC levels reaching upwards of 27 percent (Lee 2012). Hemp was a major natural resource throughout history, but its production increased into a large-scale commodity during colonialism through the late nineteenth century. Hemp was so useful as an agricultural product, it was often mandated to be sown by colonial powers due to its wide industrial benefits as George Washington decreed “make the most out of Indian hempseed, sow it everywhere” (Lee 2012, 170; Caulkins et al. 2016, 10). Hemp was later banned under the Marijuana Tax Act and was sourced from legal botanic plants with similar properties and sold under the name hemp. This continued until 1999, when the first growing permit was awarded in Hawaii, ending the almost 40-year ban on hemp production (Booth 2015, 341).
The Cannabinoid System

Cannabinol (CBD) and Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) are two components of the cannabis plant and are included in an ever-growing category of compounds known as cannabinoids (Backes 2014). THC and CBD are abbreviated terms used by industry professions and consumers to judge the perceived value of cannabis strains and their potency. THC was the first cannabinoid isolated by an Israeli chemist in 1964 and is the psychoactive component within cannabis that works strictly within the cannabidiol regulatory system in the body, without affecting other regulatory systems (Backes 2014). THC is the product of a chemical reaction with CBD, the chemical with the most pronounced health benefits but lacking psychoactive components. One difference between the two is that CBD has the ability to react with other bodily systems and can even help regulate poorly functioning systems within the body, such as those with diabetes, glaucoma, migraines, HIV-AIDS, and other afflictions (Backes 2014). THC and CBD are inherently linked in their mutually beneficial roles; THC needs CBD to exist, and CBD’s health effects are greatly enhanced by its partnership with THC. The two are also linked in terms of their ratios within the plant; both levels cannot continuously rise but are mutually interdependent (Backes 2014; Zorn 2017).

Strains on sale for consumption in Colorado consistently test 10-30 percent THC with .05-5 percent CBD (Backes 2014). For a medical patient looking to not incur psychoactive experiences, a higher level of CBD is preferred, for the informal network dealer and recreational consumer, the highest THC strain is preferred (Backes 2014). Cannabis geneticists around the world have been breeding plants to increase the percentage of THC for consumers, and testing has shown that Colorado cannabis strains are almost five times as potent as cannabis that was consumed in the 1960s (roughly 8 percent THC) (Hudak 2016, 17; Caulkins et al. 2016, 13). Intoxication from THC occurs when cannabis is consumed, and THC is absorbed into the bloodstream. THC can be detected within a certain time frame via blood and hair samples. Due to individual metabolisms that accumulate compounds differently and variable amounts that users consume, this detection window is not constant. For someone who may consume a few
times a year, the detection window could last only a few days, with a chronic user’s detection window lasting up to four weeks (Backes 2014).

Terpenes refer to specific forms of organic compounds that are produced within the cannabis plant and other types of botanic materials. Similar to THC/CBD, terpenes can be isolated and bred genetically into cannabis strains to create unique smells and flavors for consumers (Backes 2014; Weed Maps 2017). When consumers use cannabis tasting wheels and open up jars to smell flower products, they are mostly looking for specific terpene profiles that roughly correspond to the strains’ names. Guides and maps to terpene profiles are often handed out at cannabis dispensaries as education. Cannabis enthusiasts also claim that terpenes help patients relieve specific health benefits and interact with other molecules within cannabinoid systems (Backes 2014; Weed Maps 2017).

Science has yet to catch up with cannabis. Laboratories and medical trials have been pressured to understand the interactions of cannabinoids to help the industry enhance and create new products. Industry experts often explain that you cannot simply “take out” CBD, THC, or terpenes from the plant due to what is termed the “The entourage effect,” which states that a combination of flavonoids, cannabinoids, and other cannabis compounds are synergistic in nature and need each other to active certain beneficial components (NCSBN 2018). This means that new technologies and research are needed to understand the relationships between these components to better enhance its use-value for patients and recreational users.

About This Dissertation

This dissertation provides an analysis of the recent developments in cannabis production and consumption in Denver, Colorado. Chapter 2 provides a reasonably comprehensive historical overview of cannabis as a commodity and comprises a theoretical introduction to commodity studies outlining some key principles behind anthropological paradigms on capitalist market systems. Drawing on labor theories of value and commodity “social lives,” economic systems are shown to drastically change the material world as well as production relationships surrounding economic trade. Chapter 3 comprises of research
methods that were employed during the study and details the nature of fieldwork in ethnographic writing. Harnessing qualitative research methods, such as the hermeneutic interview and participant observation, ethnographic data collection is central to the applied anthropology toolkit. Though studying il/legal markets can be challenging, consulting the Anthropological Code of Ethics and previous ethnographies that also work outside the boundaries of prescribed economic systems helped to guide data collection.

Chapter 4 serves as a foundation for analyzing the production of cannabis in Colorado and outlines various regulatory frameworks that are pertinent in understanding the cannabis commodity chain in later chapters. Institutional frameworks, such as Colorado’s Vertical Integration system, curbed capitalist monopolies and kept cannabis profits within local jurisdictions. When vertical integration ended in October of 2014, an explosion of cannabis enterprises and products flooded the market as new technologies were unbounded by state restrictions of singular production chains. This chapter aims to explain the production and consumption of various cannabis products currently on the market and some of the unique challenges faced by the industry regarding the production and consumption of an il/legal commodity. Chapter 5 includes an overview of how the industry has shifted since legalization, taking into account the transition of cannabis from a medical commodity into a recreational commodity. It also outlines barriers to the medical marijuana market and the dichotomies found between medical and recreational cannabis. This chapter also provides a foundation of how a typical cannabis dispensary operates, pertinent information that is needed to fully comprehend the role of a budtender who works within a dispensary marketplace. Chapter 6 is an in-depth analysis of the everyday lives of Denver budtenders, illuminating the occupational and economic difficulties working within a federal il/legal industry. This chapter introduces the reader to the lived experience of a budtender and the difficulties faced when trying to maintain financial stability. Chapter 6 also helps to uncover some of the more ambiguous and illegal aspects of the position and helps to clarify standard budtender etiquette. In Chapter 7, the concept of cannabis as a cultural tourist experience is further explored, identifying key factors in the production of cannabis tourism and market holidays. This chapter focuses on cannabis-inspired events that bring in revenue for both the industry and the state and looks at how the il/legal cannabis industry has
changed existing economic sectors to incorporate the new commodity. Chapter 7 also looks at participatory cultural productions that attract visitors to celebrate cannabis as a community in Colorado specifically. The remainder of the dissertation focuses on the evaluation of cannabis as a commodity during transitionary frameworks and offers a discussion of lessons learned from cannabis capitalism within the Colorado regulatory system. This dissertation is not intended to be a comprehensive analysis of cannabis in Colorado. As such, an extended discussion of cannabis law, science, and health is beyond the scope of this dissertation.
Table 1: Research Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Argument/ Theoretical Framework and Literature</th>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Location</th>
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<tr>
<td>Commodity Chain Analysis (CC) and Political Economy</td>
<td>Participant Observation</td>
<td>Production: Seed to Sale</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Archival Research</td>
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<tr>
<td>Provision Analysis</td>
<td>Participant Observation</td>
<td>Distribution: Dispensary Phases</td>
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<td>Formal and Informal Market Systems in Economic Regulation</td>
<td>Ethnographic Data</td>
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<td>Political Economy</td>
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<td>Exploitation of Labor Under Capitalism: Labor Theory of Value</td>
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<td>Structural Violence</td>
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<td>Agency and Intersectionality</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tourist and Experience Economy</td>
<td>Ethnographic Data</td>
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<td>Illegal Trade and Informal Markets</td>
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<td>Symbolic/Cultural Anthropology</td>
<td>Auto-ethnography</td>
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CHAPTER 2:
THEORIZING THE CANNABIS COMMODITY

Cannabis has been highly documented in the historical record by almost every major civilization in some way or form. The history of cannabis and its commodified forms directly connects to cannabis research in Colorado because it helps explain how Colorado cannabis has transformed from a plant into a commodity, as well as how the production of cannabis commodities has disrupted previous production and consumption flows. Much of the perplexity of what cannabis is, and why it is illegal, stems from confusion from linguistic terms and cannabis’ various forms. This chapter seeks to give the reader an understanding of what cannabis is, and what it is not, to help clarify cannabis as a commodity and explores how the anatomy of the cannabis plant dictates its commodification. This chapter also illuminates how cannabis has been commodified and circulated alongside political movements to uncover the negotiated roles between legal and illegal cannabis.

Socio-Political History of Cannabis in the United States

In the late 1800s, cannabis was popular among bourgeoisie circles on the east coast. Pictures of high-class women in “hashish houses” were introduced to tabloid journals in the 1870s (Lee 2012, 122; Antique Cannabis Book 2016). Advertisements of this style would continue through the 1880s with popular culture magazines featuring wealthy New Yorkers at hashish parties masquerading around wearing posh oriental clothing. Hash eating and smoking was associated with the bourgeoisie class during this period, copying similar trends among high-class European Hash clubs, and was often found among symbols of luxury such as silk smoking robes, hats, felt slippers, chandeliers of oriental designs, pillows, ethnic clothes, and exotic plants (Lee 2012, 122-124).
The term marijuana was subsequently adopted by political figures to construct fear propaganda after the Mexican-American War (1846-48), propaganda that led Americans to develop a growing distaste for Mexican immigrants, and a legacy of racial discrimination currently still practiced today. After the 1900s, the racialized term of marijuana would dominate colloquial references to encourage ethnic otherness, fear, and dangerous unfamiliarity. Wealthy consumers, indicators of class taste, would later claim “I prefer not to spell cannabis with an M” because only “Mexicans use marijuana” (Hudak 2016, 23-25). Cannabis was also looked down upon within Mexico itself, as cannabis was often consumed by the lower classes – the “poor Campesinos” – which added to its unpopularity across the Americas during the time and was often referred to as the “opium for the poor” (Lee 2012, 39). People who wore clothes made from hemp were also associated with being underprivileged in the 1800s as hemp cloth was the least expensive material at the time, and wearers of hemp clothing were often referred to as “hempen homespuns” (Caulkins et al. 2016, 10).

The Mexican Revolution (1910) played a long-standing role in how cannabis would be produced, regulated, and consumed over the next century. During the revolution, hundreds of thousands of bands of Mexican guerrilla foot soldiers would wander north packing rolled marijuana cigarettes (“mota”) to enjoy in the evenings for leisure (Barcott 2015, 19). This mota became popular in the southern states and traveled to other parts of the union. The connection between impoverished immigrants and cannabis would be linked for socio-political purposes by a variety of individuals for political gain. Most notably, Harry Anslinger, who was one of the main policy creators of drug prohibition in the US government, pushed a strong racially based narrative of cannabis as a hard drug with negative societal consequences. One by one, states eventually started to ban marijuana when the general public perceived that mostly Mexican and African American populations were using, selling, and profiting from the drug (Barcott 2015, 20; Booth 2015, 164). This was a critical turning point in society, one based on racial perceptions of the poor where white affluent individuals felt they had evidence to support a “culture of poverty” theory as to why Mexican and African American populations were not as prosperous, and thus cannabis became a central
argument for systemic social inequality in the Americas (Lee 2012, 39; Booth, 2015). It also gave Aslinger a strong racially charged narrative during the Great Depression as many white Americans felt that they became increasingly threatened by people of color for access to financial resources and labor jobs. Racial social marketing of cannabis by the government often portrayed African American and Mexican men chasing white women, and, even more horrific for the time, white women wanting to experiment sexually with men of color after consuming cannabis (Lee 2012, 52). This fear of racial mixing increased as jazz halls and hash parties were also liminal areas where different classes and colors would unite to smoke the prohibited herb.

After US President Richard Nixon announced his War on Drugs in 1971, little changed for the influx of Mexican sourced cannabis, which was estimated to make up around 10 percent of total Mexican exports at the time (Lee 2012, 117). Nixon, who was famous for alienating segments of the population, tried to hatch a political ploy titled “operation intercept” to blackmail the Mexican government into stricter policies on cannabis production, leading to the eventual decrease in Mexican imports of cannabis (Lee 2012, 117). The subsequent market decline of the production of cannabis from Mexico did little to curb consumption practices but did allow market space for other countries to profit from the importation of cannabis (Booth 2015; Wainwright 2016, 230-55). To meet consumer demand, cannabis came streaming in from Colombia, Thailand, and Hawaii. Americans also began to leave the United States for drug tourism (the “hippie trail”), leading to the proliferation of cannabis smuggling rings across the globe (Lee 2012; Booth 2015).

As decades of the legal prohibition of cannabis continued, and the spread of cannabis distribution and use progressed, economists and government personnel realized that large amounts of money were being lost not only on drug prevention but also on possible revenue from the cannabis market. With this information being discussed, American entrepreneurs, activists, and policymakers started to imagine the United States where cannabis was legal and regulated. Sparking the attention of wealthy business owners, large financial donations started making a difference on the ground in transforming the brand image of cannabis from a symbolic form of immigrant racism, images of stoned hippies, or crazed drug users into a
more health-centered wellness commodity to capture revenue profits from informal industries (Sommers 2017).

There has been a steady shift in views on cannabis as public perception gains momentum for cannabis legalization. Gallup Polls show a steady increase in support since the year 2000 with around 33 percent favoring legalization, to 43 percent around the time of medical marijuana legalization, and 77 percent in 2013, which was before recreational legalization in Colorado (Barcott 2015, 17). Of those 77 percent, the poll showed respondents overwhelming thought that cannabis both had a legitimate medical use and 83 percent favored legal prescriptions by doctors. Support for legalization has increased at every education level, although the gains have been smallest among Americans with a high school education or less (Galston 2013).

A recent line of research has brought to light some of the various reasons for the slow transition into medical marijuana tolerance starting in the 1990s. First, controversial discussions relating to cannabis use started in communities in California. The debate centered around patients suffering from terminal illnesses, with many arguing that patients deserved to consume any substance they felt helped relieve pain (Hudak 2016, 139). HIV and cancer often inflict patients with wasting disease and the needs for natural appetite stimulates like cannabis had been known to be incredibly helpful in overcoming appetite suppression (Caulkins et al. 2016, 190). The pro-decriminalization argument during this time relied heavily on constitutional claims such as the right to personal freedoms, an argument that catered to both sides of the political realm.

Another highly controversial reason centered around racial injustice as a reason for decriminalization, as members of communities of color accounts for the majority of cannabis arrests in the United States. This points to the United States' larger issue of systematic institutional racism and the incarceration of people of color. For example, African Americans alone account for 58 percent of cannabis arrests and are 2.5 times more likely to be arrested than other segments of the population (Caulkins et al. 2016, 96; Hudak 2016, 141). Racial disparities involving cannabis charges in the criminal justice system stem from carefully contrived socio-economic mythologies leading African Americans to
be arrested for possession at four times the rate of white users, even though both groups consume roughly the same amount annually (Drug Alliance 2015).

It was clear to many of the generations of Americans that lived through various installments of the War on Drugs that the cost of such programs did little to reduce drug trafficking and use. The high cost of the prohibition on taxpayers amounted to an average of $3.6 billion annually, while law enforcement continued to struggle with the cost of curbing high consumer demand for cannabis and other illegal narcotics (Galston 2013, 7; Hudak 2016, 141; Caulkins et al. 2016, 123). This lack of progress on the War on Drugs led citizens to become distrustful of government narratives and drug propaganda, especially when confronted with the “real “experienced side effects of cannabis use during various experimental phases (Caulkins et al. 2016, 190). With more potent psychoactive drugs hitting the black market, cannabis is often seen as a fairly safe substance with which to experiment. Direct contact with people who have used or produced cannabis is said to encourage the general public’s change on stance with cannabis (Galston 2013, 4). The increasing normative nature of cannabis use thus added to its increasing ambivalence and familiarity in the general public, aiding the dissipation of social negative sentiment, and furthering skepticism of government hyperbole.

National Politics and the Legalization Movement

National politics have significantly affected different phases of the il/legalization movement throughout time, leading to the current push on a national scale for cannabis’ federal legalization. Bushan (2015) argues the main motivations for state legalization reform are identified as threefold: First public health and safety concerns, secondly, the elimination of black-market sales, and lastly, the benefit of the increased tax revenue from legalization (Bushan 2015, 191). Following this position, Galston claims that state support for legalization has been strategically framed within a multitude of secondary reasonings that overcame society’s ambivalence towards cannabis use. Secondary reasoning provided by supporters was that the enforcement of laws constituted a waste in public resources, taxing may provide new public revenue in the form of taxation, and the enforcement of current laws is spotty and discriminatorily unfair.
Bushan further claims that future legalization of other states will be based on the perceived success of state experimentation in regulatory structures currently underway (Galston 2013, 3). Each state has fabricated a system with different mechanisms of tracking and selling, allowing the federal government to conduct state-to-state experimentation to see how each system works and its subsequent limits. Colorado’s unique vertical integration system has currently been heralded as the prevailing system, though with the advent of other newly polished legalized structures, the vertical integration system as the exemplary model was subsequently replaced. As states continue to legalize and normalize the use and sale of cannabis, the federal government will have to eventually make a decision that standardizes practices across state lines.

At the federal level, the US Department of Justice (DOJ) is in charge of the enforcement of federal law. In 2013, the DOJ released a telling statement that announced that each state would be able to regulate its own systems without interference from federal agencies (Graham 2015, 158). This lack of interference would only be upheld if states showed that their regulatory systems were actively being enforced and warned that federal law would be activated and apply within eight specific scenarios: Distribution of marijuana to minors; Revenue from the sale of marijuana going to criminal enterprise; Diversion of marijuana from states; State-authorized marijuana activity used to cover other illegal activity; Violence and the use of firearms in cultivation and distribution; Drugged driving and adverse public health consequences; Growing on public lands and environmental dangers posed by production; Preventing possession of marijuana on federal property (within state parks, conservation areas, etc.) (Bushan 2015, 193; Graham 2015, 158). In addition to the statement, the federal government also gave the “go-ahead” nod to financial institutions to start accepting monetary cannabis profits, previously illegal under federal law. This softened stance has not eased financial institutions from being hesitant or weary as cannabis businesses are not allowed under federal law to claim bankruptcy which aggravates risk computations for banks. The federal prohibition of cannabis continues to create obstacles in building efficient economies of scale, while simultaneously allowing state experiments leeway in corporate cannabis regulation (Graham 2015)
The first international drug convention on record was the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs (SCND) in 1961 which clearly outlined cannabis as a Schedule I drug and criminalized narcotics on an international scale, this convention would later be the basis for the Controlled Substance Act (CSA) which passed in 1970 on a federal level by President Richard Nixon. The CSA laid out a series of substances and levels of harm that coincided with consequences if citizens were found in possession of these substances. The levels also were supposed to correspond with potential abuse, the substance's applications to the medical field, as well as its overall safety in terms of addiction (DEA 2021; Anderson 2020).

Therefore, Schedule I substances were thought to pose the highest risk to the public, while schedule 5 posed the least risk. Schedule I drugs consist of chemical compounds such as heroin, LSD, Ecstasy, MDMA, bath salts, and Peyote. Schedule II drugs include Dilaudid, Fentanyl, Oxycodone, and Morphine. Schedule III drugs include Vicodin, Ketamine, and anabolic steroids. Schedule IV drugs include Valium, Xanax, Ambien, and Klonopin. Schedule V drugs include a wide variety of antidiarrheal and analgesic compounds, most notably cough suppressants like Robitussin AC, that have more than 200 mg of codeine per 100 ml. The CSA is regulated by the Drug Enforcement Administration has control over the prosecution of individuals who are in possession of these substances. This means that someone who is in possession of Xanax, Fentanyl, or Vicodin, would still have a lesser punishment than someone in possession of cannabis according to the CSA. (DEA 2021)

Under the CSA member states were prohibited from possessing or controlling substances and focused the attention on the supply side of informal narcotic economies (Graham 2015, 161-62). Following the SCND came the Convention on Psychotropic Substances (CPS) in 1971. This convention aimed to implement an international control system as an addition to the previous conventions. The Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances followed in 1988 (CAIT) and was similar to the previous conferences yet imposed a mandatory criminalization for violations to policy, pushing further that there would be criminalization to those that possessed,
purchased, or cultivated drugs for personal consumption. Another contribution of CAIT was that it aimed to promote greater cooperation between law enforcement bodies on an international scale (Graham 2015).

So, who is set to control all these international drug conventions and sanctions? Technically the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) has the responsibility to regulate member countries’ actions in accord with the conventions and has since released numerous press releases condemning the violation of the SCND with the legalization of cannabis markets in Uruguay, Colorado, and Washington (Graham 2015, 164). Graham sees this as more of a verbal warning and a moderate or obligatory response to the conflict as more than 30 countries have followed the lead and decriminalized cannabis use. The United States is said to currently sidestepping the issue by pointing to the fact that marijuana is still a Schedule 1 substance by federal law (Graham 2015, 165). Bushan also notes the gravity of the United States’ role within the United Nations international sanction when saying: “Since no country has ever been found to have violated international drug control treaties, there is no precedent or formula for the United Nations to follow in response to the legalization of marijuana in Colorado and Washington. Thus, whichever action the United Nations chooses, in this case, will set a precedent for the international community” (Bushan 2015, 199).

**Big Business, Lobbyists, and Unionization**

Big business has been fueling cannabis reform since its slow inception in the last fifty years. It has been wealthy capitalist donors sponsoring marijuana policy reform and legislation since the beginning, creating traction, as donor funds from two billionaires, George Soros and Peter Lewis, spent a combined $250 million for political support for cannabis (Caulkins et al. 2016, 197). Big business has not only funded policy reform but also drives economic markets as only large firms can build the production of scale and efficiency, thus improving overall stability (Hudak 2016, 191). Big business in a capitalist system seems simply inevitable in the market economy as new competing corporations will seek to take advantage of the market share.
Often when a new product hits the open market, a period of price fluctuations leading to eventual homeostasis in price follows. This price is chosen through consumer purchasing power where the consumers decide through the market system how much they are willing to pay. In the cannabis market, wholesale prices were estimated to drop from $1,471 a pound to as low as $100 a pound in 2016. This fluctuation indicates that Colorado’s market has yet to fully mature and hit stability (Caulkings et al. 2016). This instability is further magnified by the fact that products are continuingly changing, and full estimates of target consumers and consumer taste have yet to fully surface (Caulkins et al. 2016, 110). The annual decrease of 22 percent on the price of cannabis has not stopped new businesses from getting in on the action as more than 200 marijuana-related companies are currently being publicly traded. Mass Roots, a leading cannabis technology platform, filed first for NASDEC cannabis stock. But market officials are worried about getting too close, even with companies that do not directly deal with the product, due to the risk of federal illegality.

Currently, cannabis is the largest market of any illegal substance, reaching $41 billion annually, with cocaine and heroin tied in second place around $28 billion (Caulkins et al. 2016). Many in the industry are worried that “federal legalization will depress prices further, and merge large corporations to promote the national and international brand” (Caulkins et al. 2016, 110). Regulatory capture of markets in states that have yet to legalize is also a concern. Large established corporate dispensaries in new states have a competitive advantage over companies in states that are ready and waiting to legalize (Hudak 2016, 179). For example, 2016 saw the first merger of two legal states as Oregon and Washington share borders leaving economists wondering if bordering states will produce competition with each other, effectively starting a price war amongst the “western bloc” (Hudak 2016, 185).

Cannabis lobbies have grown increasingly strong since the six-year that cannabis has become legal in Colorado. As of 2002, more than $3.5 million has been put towards registered cannabis lobbyists (Schroyer 2020). The push for legalization would inherently benefit big-business and big-pharma, along with adjacent industries that will want to capitalize on legalization, like food, tobacco, and alcohol businesses. Most of the money is currently being put towards interests surrounding banking issues, hemp
production and distribution, and further de-scheduling in illegal states (Smith 2019). Other stakeholders, include the cannabis dispensaries themselves, have taken it upon themselves to hire their own lobbyists to look after their market shares and increase revenue by changing legislation to allow greater access with less regulation for consumers and cannabis dispensaries. The topics of interest include access to banking, tax relief, home delivery methods, public consumption centers, and the long-term goal of national legalization (Schroyer 2020). Big-Canna and their DC lobbyists are focused on providing a positive view of the industry in order to get further legislation passed that allows the freedom of cannabis to move between cannabis markets on a national scale, and also legislation that gets cannabis into people’s homes quicker and easier than currently available.

Unionization has been a topic of conversation since the industry’s inception, yet there have been mixed responses by stakeholders. Unionization works by creating fair wages, benefits, and working conditions for canna-labor working in grow houses and dispensaries. By unionizing these labor positions, cannabis workers could potentially use collective bargaining to negotiate higher wages, increased health and safety measures, and find solutions to banking and finance-related problems. Industry officials often tout unionization as good for business, but companies often disagree with labor organizers (Smith 2019). Dispensaries in California have noted that unionization would add to employee costs and would “limit the ability to make changes in the terms and conditions of employment based on business needs” (Smith 2019). Another reason given for why canna-business takes issue with unions is that “it’s hard for them to focus on all the regulatory requirements,” which prevents them from taking on self-imposed requirements working with labor unions. Though labor peace provisions and agreements have been signed into law in California for any dispensary with more than 20 employees, Colorado has yet to see this type of legislation pass on a state-level.

**Regulatory Framework: Comparison to Alcohol**

Alcohol has been cannabis’s biggest comparative commodity and also serves as a framework for regulatory institutions. Alcohol’s era of prohibition has been used as a case study to show how
prohibition, and later the regulation of cannabis, followed similar lines. In 1920, under the Eighteenth Amendment, alcohol prohibition was changed via the Volstead Act, which controlled and prohibited the consumption of alcohol (Caulkins et al. 2016). Colorado, a trailblazer in its own right, had already outlawed alcohol four years earlier than federal prohibition. The act worked by targeting the producers and distributors of alcohol rather than the consumers (Caulkins et al. 2016, 106). This is currently the same tactic Washington, DC is employing with cannabis, with legal recreational cannabis coupled with illegal production and distribution sanctions (Caulkins et al. 2016, 106). Alcohol’s prohibition was described as a “noble experiment” by the American Medical Association, one that failed after it was clear that the crime rate had increased, as did citizens’ distrust in the government’s ability to enforce prohibitive measures (Lee 2012, 43). Prohibition would end in 1933 as the government realized that making alcohol less convenient to consume encouraged illegal sales of illicit goods. The government could no longer convince citizens that the enforcement of alcohol prohibition was successful as illicit markets grew to epic proportions during the prohibition era (Caulkins et al. 2016, 111).

Alcohol’s current framework of regulation and distribution in Colorado was adopted to try and regulate the production and consumption of cannabis. The regulatory framework of alcohol affects private enterprises that produce, distribute, and sell alcohol products for profits. Private enterprises are restricted by the government with a special license that can be revoked or at any time. These companies are subject to “normal” business regulations that other businesses are subject to plus extra regulations set out by the government that is specific to the alcohol industry. The regulations are largely in place to manage market forces and avoid market failures on the production and distribution side; however, individuals are regulated in terms of who, when, and where alcohol can be consumed though, unlike cannabis, there are no quantity restrictions on sales (Caulkins et al. 2016, 131)

In order for a substance to be classified as a controlled substance, it needed to fulfill three key characteristics outlined by the federal government (Hudak 2016, 53). First, it needed to have been proven to be highly addictive and at risk for abuse. Second, the substance must have no medical uses in the United States. And, lastly, the substance cannot be proven to be used safely, even under medical
supervision. Even though both alcohol and tobacco meet the guidelines of a controlled substance having no medical value and being highly addictive in nature, they were not proscribed due to their normative nature in society and the economic power of these industries (Hudak 2016, 16, 53).

Though the cannabis market is based on alcohol’s commodity chain, the differences in consumption and regulation are many. Tobacco and alcohol are two substances that have dramatic behavioral and biological health risks that exceed all illicit drugs combined; tobacco is estimated to kill around 500,000 individuals a year, and 100,000 alcohol-related incidents occur annually (Caulkins et al. 2016, 110). In terms of consumption, cannabis and alcohol have different effects on the human body; compared to alcohol, the psychoactive effects of THC are felt much more quickly when inhaled, giving the user more control over dosing and self-regulation (Hudak 2015, 16). Alcohol has been linked to aggression in consumers, whereas cannabis is seen to have the opposite effect, inducing paranoid and sometimes overly cautious behavior (Caulkins et al. 2016, 110). The most obvious difference between the substances is the outcomes of substance poisoning also known as an “overdose.” An average 200-pound man who consumes too much alcohol may reach a blood alcohol content of .334 (which could induce death) in less than one hour after 12 shots of alcohol. Cannabis consumption, on the other hand, cannot itself lead to human fatalities (Colorado Marijuana 2017; Backes 2014).

In a 1990 study conducted by the National Institutes of Health, researchers found that cannabinoids are not congregated on brain stems as opposed to alcohol and opioids (Herkenham et al. 1990). When substances congregate around the brain stem, they interact with cardiovascular health and breathing, leading to complications. On the opposite side of the spectrum, cannabinoids are focused more in the basal ganglia and affect the centers of the brain that control movement and comprehension. Researchers suggest this may explain why THC is not lethal to the human body. Further research on the comparative risk assessment of alcohol, tobacco, cannabis, and other illicit drugs showed cannabis at the bottom of the list of 10 drugs, with alcohol, nicotine, cocaine, and heroin rounding out the top of the list as “high risk” substances (Herkenham et al. 1990; SAMHSA 2017).
Formal and Informal Market Systems in Economic Regulation

The pricing of legal cannabis also directly relates to illegal black-market sales of cannabis and the control of unregulated markets in other states. If the retail price for cannabis is too high, consumers will look to other revenue sources, allowing black markets to flourish (Hudak 2016, 177). On the other hand, the prices could also be undervalued, which would result in an overload of cannabis available in the market, further plummeting the cost for consumers but also shutting down small businesses that can’t withstand the production costs (Hudak 2016, 178). Either way, black markets now depend on siphoning out legal cannabis from Colorado into illegal distribution chains rather than importing from peripheral countries. Even considering the high state taxation, legal cannabis still comes out less expensive to smuggle than Mexican sourced product. As Wainwright frankly puts it: “Smuggled cannabis from Colorado or Washington came out cheaper than Mexican weed in forty-seven of the forty-eight mainland states, only in Texas, right on Mexico’s doorstep, is the cartel’s product a better value” (Wainwright 2016, 230). Similarly, Dan Nelson of Wikileaf, a marijuana price-comparison website says, “As with any market or commodity, consumers are looking to get the most for their money, which means they want good pot, and they want it cheap…Your best bet is to head west and stick to medical dispensaries. As far as what cities you are going to want to head to, the Mile-High City and the Emerald City both live up to their names in supplying what is likely the country’s most inexpensive marijuana” (CheatSheet.com 2015).

Legal marijuana also has a marketing advantage over illegal products as each dispensary is now required to test for quality and strength of each strain in the recreational market, allowing control and specialization in products (Wainwright 2016, 219). New, infrequent, medical, and specialized users all prefer to have tested quality products rather than unidentified strain cannabis. Furthermore, after testing, it has been found that Mexican sourced cannabis is less potent than the genetically engineered cannabis strains in Colorado; Mexican sourced cannabis tested consistently around 7 percent per gram while Colorado strains can get up to 24 percent THC per gram, making the commodity retain more value for the consumer (Wainwright 2016, 201; Plunkett 2017).
Mexican Marijuana and Price Fluctuations

It has been estimated that the Mexican cartels have controlled the production and distribution of marijuana in more than 1,000 cities across the United States, resulting in roughly 50-70 percent of all cannabis consumed (Wainwright 2016, 255). When the informal and formal cannabis sectors are compared and contrasted, a richer view of the globalized economic picture becomes apparent. The cartels operate within the normative framework of informal activity, with the base price fluctuating in relation to the distance the product travels from the border. This price is based on risk, as the increase in distance increases the risk of being seized. Economists have figured that wholesale prices rise around $500 per every 620 miles the product travels (Wainwright 2016, 230). This business tactic is evidenced by looking at nationwide statistics on marijuana prices per kilo with the cheapest illegal cannabis found at the border city of El Paso, Texas, where 1 kilo sells for approximately $200 compared with New York City at $1,000, and farthest out in Hawaii at around $6,000 (Wainwright 2016, 230). It has been estimated that the Mexican cartel earns around $2 billion a year from selling marijuana in the United States.

Legal domestic production is presaged as the downfall for cartels worldwide as potential revenue loss would be devastating. Firstly, legal cannabis can benefit from economies of scale as much commercial cannabis is grown in warehouses that can control and regulate products. A typical 100,000-square foot legal grow house uses over 150,000 watts of light and 100,000 watts of air conditioning. Adding up the expenses, it costs about $800 a day to maintain. Though this seems expensive, one plant produces around 75 grams of marijuana, equal to about $1,000 in retail value (Wainwright 2016, 217).

Illegal grows need to be decentralized due to the large amount of heat and electricity growing requires. This brings high risk to illegal grows in terms of being caught by both legal structures as well as thieves. For example, modern practices used by “cannabis cowboys” employ heat sensors on drones to locate illegal grows and then proceed to steal or extort the individuals for profit. Legal marijuana also has a marketing advantage over illegal products as each dispensary is now required to test for quality and strength of each strain, allowing control and specialization in products (Wainwright 2016, 219). New
users, infrequent, medical, and specialized users would all prefer to have tested quality product rather than unidentified strain marijuana.

Economically speaking, it is now cheaper and safer to smuggle drugs out of Colorado or Washington than from Mexico, which is changing the very nature of the informal economic system of global cannabis. Denver producers aim to sell a pound of cannabis for roughly $1,000, equaling about $2.20 a gram. That same gram retailed in Colorado then becomes about $11-13 for medical patients or $16-20 for recreational users (Wainwright 2016, 229). Even considering the high state taxation, legal cannabis still comes out less expensive to smuggle than Mexican sourced product. As Wainwright explains:

The legal market has become the black market for the rest of the United States. All you need is an ID proving you’re over 21, and you can buy up to a quarter of an ounce of marijuana. Smuggled cannabis from Colorado or Washington came out cheaper than Mexican weed in forty-seven of the forty-eight mainland states, only in Texas, right on Mexico’s doorstep, is the cartel’s product a better value. This means that the Mexican cartels could lose up to three-fourths of their current business in the cannabis market. Wainwright 2016, 230

**Cannabis Tourism and Illegal Trade**

Global cannabis tourism is currently underway as individuals cross state and country borders to take part in illicit tourist practices both for genuine purposes as well as “business trips” for informal actors. Cannabis-friendly versions of AirBnB, cannabis Uber companies, weed tours, and spring break tours are already well underway. Wainwright notes that within the first nine months of legalized recreational sales, 44 percent of consumers came from outside the state of Colorado (2013:221). The Denver airport as well has seen a major increase in layovers, as cannabis limo services will pick up layover tourists, take them on a short cannabis smoking tour, and drop them conveniently back off at their gate (Wainwright 2016, 222).

As outlined above, it makes more economic sense to source product domestically within legalized states or from home grows and then smuggle product between state/territory lines. Small-scale citizen
producers across the world agree that the calculated risk (depending on social norms and legal sanctions within their locale) of getting caught is generally pretty low. Potter found that Germans, Austrians, and Canadians were the most likely to perceive risk as high, whereas over half of all respondents that were Belgian, American, and the Dutch say the risk is categorized as “very low.” This is especially telling when coupled with the statistic that over three-fourths of all domestic growers have never been convicted of a criminal offense (Potter et al. 2013, 233).

Illegal transportation of marijuana products via air and road is much more common than people might imagine. Overall, police estimate that they have only caught less than 10 percent of product leaving Colorado alone (Wainwright 2016, 227). Shipping product in boxes via the US Postal Service is also favorable to informal market systems as the Postal Service has privacy laws that forbid employees to open packages unless they are deemed “suspicious.” The US Postal Service intercepted 57 pounds of marijuana sent out of Colorado in “suspicious” packages in 2010 and 497 pounds in 2013 (Potter et al. 2013, 227; Wainwright 2016). Packages are preferable to the informal online community dubbed the “darknet” where “crypto markets” and “cryptocurrency” are used to exchange cannabis products. A study of the illegal drug trade online has found that these markets are growing, and out of a total of 23 markets, 43,175 total drug listings were posted. The technology to mask the smell, taste, and visual appearance of marijuana for transport has improved. For one, high-priced luxury concentrate products are extracted with butane and propane leave very little odor for K-9 dogs to smell. Cannabis dogs cannot smell past various barriers, such as triple airtight plastic bags that are sealed with an industrial food-packaging machine (Wainwright 2016). With the increased drug violence seen around the world and its perceived low risk of being caught producing, the global flow of import substitution makes economic sense within the Global North...for now.

With the increase in tourism and legal cannabis in domestic markets, it makes sense that most authors have picked up on the fact that most illegal product is now coming from legal states, and not from Mexico. Wainwright says that with each new state growing their cannabis economy, the illegal markets will inevitably shrink in relation, and “the vast American cannabis market remains the cartels to lose as
Americans burn through 3000 tons of marijuana a year” (Wainwright 2016, 225, 231). Wainwright seems to extrapolate that the black market in cannabis will turn into a gray market, one in which cannabis will be purchased through legal systems and then sold illegally in states with prohibition, or to people under the age of 21, which is what is currently happening (Wainwright 2016, 22).

Potter goes on further to infer the fourth wave of cannabis cultivation. He imagines that after the United States leads the way for cannabis legalization, other foreign governments will also start to legalize and thus start international trading systems. This leads Potter to believe that production, just like all other agricultural products, will be pushed to either South America or Indonesia due to lower costs and pricing structures (Potter et al. 2016, 237). If history is correct, this would mean that domestic production of cannabis currently underway in the United States would move back to Mexico to take advantage of competitive pricing of low rents and wages thus: “If Mexico starts producing cannabis for American markets, Denver becomes Detroit: bust, having become cheaper competition from abroad and so legalization may turn the cannabis industry full circle: from illegal production in Mexico to legal production in the United States, and eventually back to Mexico. The only difference will be that the Mexican cannabis farmers will be working for Philip Morris and the like, rather than for the drug cartels” (Potter et al. 2016, 223).

Legally speaking, the story looks like it may be heading in the same direction, albeit more slowly and with more caution than the commercial realm. Chatwin reveals important considerations she thinks international actors should take into consideration when starting the shift of ending cannabis prohibition. Firstly, the heterogeneity of nation-states would require different systems due to each unique set of socio-geographic issues. This would inherently require a plethora of interventions to be made available, and so a push should be made to experiment and present these models to the global community for review. She says: “theoretically, at least, once innovative drug strategies have been implemented, they can be evaluated, shared widely, and adopted by other countries, regions or cities that have similar needs” (Chatwin 2015, 3). Secondly, though the creation of diverse legal institutions is possible under UN conventions, the conventions severely limit the possibilities, and even in many cases condone clandestine
activity within legal systems such as seen in the Netherlands with the coffee shop framework. She notes that “this places coffee shops in a previous semi-legal position whereby the front door sales of cannabis are regulated, but the backdoor supply of coffee shops remains in the hands of criminals” (Chatwin 2015, 3). Lastly, Chatwin stresses the importance of a revised global drug policy within an international framework which would require that the international community focuses efforts on finding the best fit solution to individual countries while also holding onto a set of minimum standards (Chatwin 2015, 3-4).

Graham also warns that with increased inflexibility or change within international sanctions, the greater the possibility that they will be undermined in general. Graham argues that rescheduling marijuana would increase the strength and authority of UN drug conventions. She says: “The ability of Uruguay and the United States to openly violate a provision of the conventions with relative impunity invites future treaty violations” (Graham 2015, 165). This brings forth the notion that if treaties are being undermined, the eventual loss of authority over the actions of member states is one impending consequence.

The legality and policy conundrums faced by nations eager to decriminalize or legalize cannabis can cause major issues politically and economically. Three levels of legality need to be taken into consideration as the state, federal, and international consequences may be felt by individual territories or nation-states. The future of legality within the United States and other countries globally will depend on the international experiment currently taking place. Multiple quasi-legal systems are being used simultaneously in different parts of the world, and the consequences are being felt elsewhere. Each article chosen tried to offer a valuable perspective on global cannabis markets to create a holistic, interdisciplinary look into changing perspectives of cannabis socially, economically, and legally on a global scale.

**Theoretical Perspectives in Economic Anthropology**

Currently, there is a large gap in the literature regarding legal Colorado cannabis economies, regulatory systems of such legal economies, structural limitations, or evaluation strategies. Literature on
the anthropology of cannabis and its il/legality have only recently begun to enter the conversation (Polson 2019; Carrier et al. 2018; Giraudo 2020). This is most obvious since they are inherently illegal within the global realm, and thus, much academic work has focused on informal and illegal network systems and clandestine criminal activity. In the past decade, there has been a surge in published opinions, yet academic peer-reviewed research continues to lag. As the papers are written by the time they are published, it seems their analysis has already outdated due to changing legislature.

My theoretical approach, while located within an anthropological political economy, is necessarily interdisciplinary. I locate this approach within political economy, which inherently entails starting with the production of the commodity itself, and then comparing it with cultural and historical consumption practices. I aim to combine theoretical perspectives on consumption practices that incorporate the production chain of the commodity, and commodity chain labor practices, within the experience of consumption (see chapter 7). This interdisciplinary approach to cannabis in Colorado is taken in part due to practicality, as the quality and quantity of current peer-reviewed academic literature on current legal cannabis markets remain remarkably scarce.

The study of commodities and exchange has a long history in the discipline of anthropology but has gained more attention in the last century as commodities and consumer culture have increasingly started to dominate our lives and relationships. Globalization and technology have created a time-space compression, allowing culture, laws, and societal change to happen at a more rapid pace than seen in the past. For the purpose of this section, the definition of a commodity will refer to anything that is an economic good, something useful or valued by a society that can be exchanged or exploited within a market system (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). We look into alternative forms of capitalism and pre-capitalist forms of economies to try and find vestiges that still survive in the il/legal cannabis market today.

In a major review of a political economy approach for economic anthropology, Robotham writes: “Political economy treats the economy from the point of view of production, rather than distribution, exchange, consumption or the market. It does not ignore those things, but analyses them in relation to the role they play in the production of the material needs of society, including the need to reproduce and
expand the means of production themselves” (2012, 41). In an early definitive article, Roseberry stressed that with few exceptions, the kind of political economy with which anthropologists engaged was Marx’s critique and not with those he criticized, such as Adam Smith (1827), David Ricardo, the physiocrats, or others (Roseberry 1988, 162).

For these political economy anthropologists who take an approach from the perspective of historical materialism, “the very unit of analysis becomes defined as the outcome of political struggles (not ‘cultures’ or ‘social structures’) and the standard for judging a theory’s power then becomes explanatory purchase along with political efficacy” (Yelvington 2019, 401). Yet, neither Marxist nor any other kind of political economy comes ready-made to be applied to understand the workings of capitalist societies and especially not to fast-transitioning sectors such as the cannabis industry. This is where a rich and elaborate theoretical apparatus needs to be constructed as well as integrated into ethnographic and other methods. This is one that links production, distribution, exchange, consumption, and the market while maintaining an understanding of the primacy of production. This is the main contribution to anthropological practice that this dissertation makes.

As is well known, Marx starts *Capital, Vol. 1* (1867) with a discussion of the commodity under capitalism. In the name of an anthropological approach, I would like to consider the commodity under capitalism in a comparative perspective with other forms of production, distribution, exchange, and consumption of objects and their appearance in markets. Through the study of the potlatch in pre-capitalist societies, it is helpful to contrast commodity economies with gift economies. This will throw light on the cannabis commodity pre-legalization and also illustrate the current Colorado cannabis commodity under contemporary capitalism.

**Pre-capitalist Exchange and Primitive Economies**

Marcel Mauss, the nephew of Émile Durkheim and a French anthropologist, focused his research on the study of gift exchange concerning commodity exchange. Mauss’s work “The Gift” uses ethnographic accounts to show how the exchange of gifts, often referred to as “the potlatch” (to
feed/consume), is central to social relations and constitutes a “type of system of total services” (Mauss 1990, 8).

Mauss imagined the role of government was to provide a legal framework for a type of socialism and was wary of economic scientists as he felt that their theories of the utility of maximization were incorrect in their assumptions. Mauss outlines three obligations of the gift that are the essence of the total system that encompasses the potlatch exchange; 1) to give, 2) to receive, and 3) to reciprocate (1990, 7-9). This closely mirrors some forms of cannabis exchange pre-legalization due to the necessity of close relationships and trust in illegal dealings. These are governed by different populations through cultural rules of honor (mapula), prestige, and social obligation (Mauss 1990, 8). Objects that are being traded or exchanged in the potlatch have aspects of animism in that they possess their own spiritual power (Maori/Hau) and identity in themselves.

The potlatch can also surround religious festivals and rituals in society. Spielmann outlines how the potlatch described by Mauss can transform into intensified seasons of production and consumption during social “holidays” (Spielmann 2002, 197). This was also found in pre-legalized cannabis exchange with the creation of cannabis holidays and cannabis consumption events that took place in shared experiences, such as music concerts. Communal ritual participation and performance were indicative of craft specialization and intensification of production among small-scale communities. Since cannabis use has been described as a subculture before legalization, this closely mimics micro-communities that took part in cannabis consumption. Spielmann links subsistence practices with food demands of ritual consumption in that these special times called for ceremonial artifacts and food that would need to be produced ahead of time. The hoarding of food for the intention of feasting shows how communities not only intensify their activities, but also plan, scale, and decorate items in a specialized production process. As we will see later in the ethnography, food and ritual consumption are still readily apparent in the cannabis industry pre- and post-legalization. Craft specialization created unique objects of ritual performance based on size, shape, and color, that could be used as social payments due to their high desirability (Spielmann 2002, 199-203). While these objects were moved and circulated, they also gained
social value due to their perceived historical significance. These processes could be argued to be the beginning of community-regulated commodity specialization that was not held only by politically powered elites, but rather, it was a “ritual mode of production” that controlled and defined the production and consumption of society (Spielmann, 2002, p. 203). Spielmann’s work both expands Mauss’s idea of the potlatch, as well as shows a framework to describe the transition of economies.

Sahlins’s ethnographic work looks at the junctures of material conditions, social relations, and exchange among primitive communities (Sahlins 1972). He starts his analysis with a discussion of the economic differences of primitive and modern economies in that modern capitalism is about seizing the means of production, while primitive economy is mainly about distribution. He gives definitions of pooling, the system of reciprocities, and outlines three types of reciprocal exchange: general, balanced, and negative. Rank position within kinship structure carries economic relations (generalized reciprocity) through subordination within structure, which are then recreated and reproduced (Sahlins 1972, 193). Chiefdoms are said to be decentralized due to lineage structure, while a big-man system is centralized due to achievement of the position. Wealth distribution can be prompted by two things: fear of jealousy from the community and the adoption of moral values. Balanced reciprocity is especially good for formal friendships/kinships, affirmation of corporate alliances, marital alliances, and peacemaking. Primitive money (C-M-C) and commercial money (M-C-M) can be characterized by balanced reciprocity in peripheral social sectors. Sahlins’s work is important as it outlines both structural differences in exchange relations, as well as explores commodity relations as social relations (Sahlins 1972).

**Economic Transitions and Exchange Mediums**

Anthropologists have long recognized the importance of modes of exchange and production based on socio-cultural factors such as religion, kinship, and reciprocity (Mauss, 1990; Spielmann, 2002; Helms, 1992; Sahlins, 1992, Bourdieu, 2000; Weber 2002). Past studies have yielded important insights into the invention of paper money as symbolic objects of exchange which allowed commodities to travel through time and space without direct exchange relationships. As commodity expansion reached new
territories, individual tradesmen and tradeswomen realized they needed a medium to exchange commodities along trade routes (Surowieki, 2012; Wilk and Cliggett 2017). Before the concept of money, primitive economies created ways of defining social relations through various structures such as the potlatch and gift-giving (Surowieki 2012). Historically, money was anchored with gold or other substances of social value such as silver in Mesopotamia, or various alloys in ancient Lydia. In this instance, the gold coin “wasn’t a symbol of value, it was an embodiment of it” because it was already socially sanctioned as valuable by the community (Surowiecki 2012). Money’s main contribution to economics lies in its three roles 1) to store value for use through space and time, 2) as a unit of comparison, and 3) as a medium of exchange between commodities.

The arrival of money also strengthens state authorities and helped trade and commerce grow in a way that became depersonalized and (previously) untraceable due to impersonal economic characteristics rather than based on social ties and network connections. This impersonality also led to a new form of equality between users based on the standardized accumulation of value rather than other forms of capital, like social, moral, and cultural. Paper currency became popular in the 12th century in China, and also the banking industry in Italy, with credit, debts, and bill exchanges as important components of economic growth. Shortly after, Europe and the Americas started experimenting with different forms of paper money that were tied to the gold standard, meaning money could be exchanged for gold weights at their convenience. The gold standard ended during WWI as state governments could no longer keep up with the demand to pay soldiers for their services. Currently, only 10 percent of paper currency exists in circulation and continues to exist as people trust in its value. Current ideas of money have shifted the focus of “value” from not only symbolic values of “things,” but rather a process of exchange, work, and creation (Surowieki 2012).

With the advent of symbolic currency, the speed of production and consumption of new commodities under capitalist systems became tightly governed by political and economic arrangements leading to the commodification of new objects and services. This change in the mode of production to a
capitalist market system had lasting consequences on how societies build relationships and maintain, exchange resources, and control nature through production.

The world continued to trade goods and services via routes all over the globe, and with the advent of symbolic money systems, commodities were traveling farther and longer than ever before. As cities, education, and culture became enriched with new systems and technologies, the advent of business and capitalism started to reign in the industrialized nations. With industrialization came new problems that society had not faced before, sanitation, childcare, and inequality became new social issues for the educated elite to discuss and write about. The advent of capitalism became a major topic and would continue to be the subject of debate for academicians and political actors to this day.

**Anthropological Views on Capitalist Economies**

Max Weber’s many contributions to the study of anthropology can be seen most notably in his attempt to explain inequality among capitalist nations in his article (later made into book form and translated) “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,” an attempt at connecting modern capitalism with substratum protestant religious ideas (Weber 1905). Weber firstly dissects a passage by Benjamin Franklin as an example of his theories of the Protestant ethic, being both removed from religiosity, yet having foundations within it. Franklin’s excerpt shows how one should think about capitalistic pursuits: as an individualist duty to himself and his moral backbone (Weber 1905, 51-52). This ethos runs on foundational ideas of what a moral stance on money exchange should look like in its ideal form, such as saving, punctuality, and frugality, which Weber sees as a type of non-religious “calling” that creates individuals to increase capital. Weber illustrates how Franklin emphasizes accumulation and avoidance while opposing spontaneity and worldly luxuries. Weber argued: “Man is dominated by the making of money, by acquisition as the ultimate purpose of his life” (Weber 1905, 52). At this point for Weber, the ethic takes over and materiality becomes a means within itself rather than the need to be comforted, safe, or relatively happy. Weber traces theories back to Protestantism, and specifically Calvinism, as religious forces such as the concept of Christian aestheticism is put forth as the
proliferation of the Protestant ethic. Weber is hesitant about the changing world, as he outlines technical and economic issues associated with the industrial revolution and the rise of machinery as being a force that is inescapable by all those born into the system. This ending gives the reader a wary tale of what is to come for the spirit of capitalism (Weber 1905).

Marx analyzes the industrial change occurring during the early nineteenth century and pens his thoughts in the founding works of *Capital* and (with Fredrich Engels) *The Communist Manifesto*. Marx’s contribution lies in proposing the labor theory of value within capitalism, which essentially states that the value of a commodity is determined by the amount of labor that went into producing it and adding to the classical political economists that value can be distinguished by exchange-value and use-value – where capitalism intends to produce exchange-value and exchange-value comes to dominate over use-value. Exchange-value is produced to be exchanged for the money-form of capital to invest in more capital (Marx 1978). Marx defines a commodity as an external object that satisfies wants or needs and distinguishes between use-value, which is the ability to fulfill a consumer want or need, and exchange-value, or the value that it has within a market system based on monetary currency. For Marx, commodity exchange can be deconstructed into values that are based on relationships of the production of commodities with labor power. Marx explains that the bourgeoisie is in a constant need to increase their wealth by exploiting the working class’s labor through a Money-Commodity-Money exchange system of wealth creation. The wealth creation can only operate as long as the capitalists can exploit the labor of the proletariat by paying them less than what they produce in value (Marx 1978). The extra value created from their labor is termed surplus value and is extracted out of the working class through long work hours, lower wages, new technologies, and other means. Marx summarizes the process when saying:

The worker becomes all the poorer, the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and range. The worker becomes an ever-cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates. With the increasing value of the world of things proceeds in direct proportion the devaluation of the world of men. Marx 1978, 71
This alienation process of labor strips individuals of what it means to be human and estranges the individual from others and nature. However, due to the low wages the laborer has, and the fact that s/he probably must spend a large proportion of those wages to reproduce their existence, “the worker may only have enough for him to want to live, and may only want to live in order to have enough” (Marx 1978, 96). Capitalists need the surplus-value to create profit, and thus, the foundation of wealth creation is by the hands of the proletariat/workers. Commodities are then seen as symbols of class struggles where one class exploits the other through labor relations. Marx criticizes economists in that they fetishize commodities without realizing the essential underlying exploitation of labor, thus creating a fetishized culture of commodities and the study of them (Marx 1978).

Pierre Bourdieu’s work in Algeria (2000) seeks to address how French colonialism and the advent of technology created within capitalist markets subsequently affected traditional gift economies and gift exchanges and, in the process, how a change in the mode of production affected social relations. Before the colonial era, Algerian workers identified as peasants who would farm the land and participate in reciprocity and loans indicative of the logic of a gift and counter-gift exchange system. As time passed, these exchanges because more removed in distance and increasingly impersonal, which help enforced an economic system of calculation and self-interest. This was often called “relations of war” via an open market economy, where the war was to be fought in a general open marketplace. At the same time, a rise in shopkeepers who previously only sold small commodities from their homes began to set up private enterprises separate from their dwellings with structured working times. As one of Bourdieu’s informants reiterated, “Everything is an occupation now” (Bourdieu 2000, 22). Bourdieu points to the French army and technical advances as the demise of the pre-capitalist economic order that was once socially organized, had embodied beliefs, and practical logic. This transition also broke individuals from a system of faith, trust, and equity which further solidified social cohesion between members and kin. Bourdieu seeks to juxtapose these two systems in opposition with each other, one in which morality, good faith, and community participation remain the cornerstone of the economy, and the other in which self-interest and calculation are central (Bourdieu 2000).
Agency and Intersectionality

Agency in the new market system is both used to promote new “freedom” from the government to consume and produce cannabis, while also being one of the prime sources of discrimination in the industry; Agency, or the illusion of it, in relation to discrimination is often used to defend structural violence. Graeber shows how structural violence is different from both personal violence, which is acted on an individual agent, and cultural violence that is concerned with beliefs (2012, 112-113). For him, “structural violence” does not only imply structures that produce some type of violent effect but rather structures of fear that control an individual’s agency within structural forces. It is thus the stress and worry of their agency on the violent effect, in addition to any type of actual force that may result. He shows how “material processes, in which violence, and the threat of violence, place a crucial, constitutive role” (Graeber 2012, 113). In Farmer’s view, economic and political forces inflict suffering on micro levels that are hard to detect with science and statistics (Farmer 2002, 425). This micro suffering is experienced on an individual level, and is historically contextualized, economically motivated, and seeks to restrict an individual’s agency (Farmer 2002, 425).

The budtender and informal marijuana worker could be conceptualized as an intersectional point in the nexus between the powerful, and the powerless as the position is built on the threat of incarceration at the state and federal level (Hale 2006). This ambiguity causes endless imagining of the future political regulations, with individuals constantly seeking to and avoid and outsmart strategies of structural violence (Kallius 2016). In many ways, the industry works similar to the anthropology of boundaries in that it juxtaposes national institutions based in neoliberal economics as the proponents of impoverishment, while also being the same institutions that provide funds and social support to the individuals in question (Hale 2006, 100). State legalized cannabis is both the oppressors of the working population, while also being the source of job creation and taxes that fund social services. This is also similar to border ethnographies as both seek to address concerns on the border and boundary creation and ambiguous rhetoric (Kallius 2016, 29).
The industry worker position follows closely to what Graeber entitles “interpretive labor” and is unequal on the side of the oppressed who become alienated from society in relation to the maneuverability in expectation of violence (Graeber 2012, 119). Likewise, micro suffering and structural violence can be found on multiple levels in legal, illegal, and il/legal markets. Consumers and producers of cannabis in legal states continually have the threat of federal law enforcement via multiple federal institutions; the IRS can freeze personal and business accounts, the FBI can arrest workers and shut down grow sites, and international banking sanctions that have the power to immediately bankrupt capitalist entrepreneurs. Actors in illegal states that produce and consume cannabis share these concerns, along with the added layer of clandestine activity and fear of incarceration at the state level.

Intersectionality of discrimination and government oversight are integral aspects of systemic suffering whose effects are unevenly distributed to poor and vulnerable populations most commonly found in laborers in the marijuana industry. Farmer urges anthropologists to conceptualize embodied suffering of structural processes that are historically situated, geographically broad, and contain various nexus, or “axes” of discriminatory social attributes (2002, 432-433). Farmer recapitulates how differential aspects of personhood, such as gender and race, aid in the systematic violence encountered by individuals (2002, 434). He contends that is much more difficult than actual physical violence, which requires little thought (2012, 122). Ticktin also worries about intervention practices and how that may lead to further intersectional structural violence for people of color who will be the victims of government surveillance and invasion, based on racial histories of welfare and perceived parenthood fitness (2014, 67). This has already been spoken about within the marijuana industry as pre-legalization cannabis “dealers” were mainly people of color, who are now legally barred from participating in the legal structure due to previous arrests surrounding the sale and production of marijuana. In many ways, the legalization of cannabis has siphoned money from underrepresented communities and has barred them from making profits in the legal market economy.
Consumption and Commodity Chains within an Anthropological Political Economy

In order to discuss cannabis as a legal commodity, an anthropological approach to commodities and their respective chains are helpful in conceptualizing the relationship between production and consumption. By “commodity chain,” it is meant the resources put together to produce a good in various processes of production, linked with distribution, all the way through until the good gets to the consumer and is consumed. Anthropologists can add to the theory and literature on commodity chain analysis by providing a more holistic approach to the production and consumption chain. Cross-cultural comparisons based on ethnographic qualitative data collection within each layer, or “path,” can give a more complex view of processes and relationships than we have previously seen from top-down approaches stemming from sociology and development. Anthropologists can also help dissect different symbolic processes in the cultural creation of meaning that affects consumers' views of their experience in the consumption process, as well as how individuals may view the production of these commodities (Miller 1985).

Commodity chain analysis has been a popular mode of construct in sociology, geography, and history and has been used as a way of uncovering relationships that govern a global political economy (Gilbert 2009, 43). As Gilbert (2009) pointed out, many academics who study commodities may not explicitly establish their work as residing within a commodity chain framework. Gilbert outlines previous theoretical approaches to commodities that describe the commodity chain in different paradigms, including commodity chain analysis (CC), commodities as a system of provisions, global commodity chain (GCC), or global value chain (GVC) (43).

One way to conceptualize a commodity chain is by looking at the linked processes across space and time is often described as the World Systems (GCC) body of theory linking production to consumption (Wallerstein and Hopkins 1986). The commodity chain analysis takes into account capital transfer in the form of surplus-value and uneven accumulation between places that are linked through production and consumption. Wallerstein and Hopkins (1986) approach to commodities starts with consumption itself and then is traced backward in the process rather than starting with production. They show that this "chain construction" works best when following relationships and organization flows from
the places and people that consume them, leading to what they term "world economy organizing chains."
The world economy is hypothesized to go through cyclical rhythms that start not at the production point, but rather farther on down the commodity chain during consumption, leading one to believe that the cyclical rhythms begin at consumption itself, leading to "delineation of the anatomy of the chain which begins from the point of final production of a consumable" (1986, 160). This approach follows closely with a world-systems analysis that links producing countries to consuming ones and closely follows a center-periphery analysis of commodity chains. This commodity chain approach to consumption was then later expanded on by Gereffi et al. (1994; 2005) work on a global commodity chain approach to include a more buyer-driven analysis of global economic systems. This is often contrasted with Global Value Chain analysis, which looks at institutions and governmental firms that also affect global value chains.

Anthropologist Eric Wolf’s contribution to capitalist commodity studies lies in his canonical book “Europe and the People Without History” (1982), which theorizes a series of global socio-cultural exchange relationships using a materialist perspective based in dialogue with Marxist theory and historicism. Material relationships are the central theme laid out for the reader to observe, tracing the flows and consequences of these flows from foodstuffs to luxury goods and even human commodities. Wolf gives a strong initial explanation of the switch from ideological positions of governmentality to that of political science, which lost the "embeddedness of relations" and "predisposed one to think of social relations not merely as autonomous but as causal in their own right, apart from their economic, political, or ideological context" (Wolf 1982, 9). He also brings forth the ethnocentric view of a teleological historical analysis based on Western philosophy and aims to explore the processes of historical change from a dialectical relational view of social group transformation. Wolf differentiates between mercantile/merchant wealth and capitalist productions, summarizing that "capitalism, to be capitalism, must be capitalism-in-production" (Wolf 1982, 79). Wolf’s analysis of the expansion of capitalism after the industrial revolution explains how in the face of expanded technologies, capitalism inherently needs a consistent growth of production, so the system does not collapse into a crisis (Wolf 1982, 299). Wolf
expands on these destructive capital ideas and notes that Marx had not yet worked out how market systems become flooded with commodities, thus having prices fall below value and creating decreased revenue for capitalists (Wolf 1982, 299).

Gerefi et al.'s (2006) contribution comes from their work entitled The Governance of Global Value Chains (GVC) which proposed a new framework for understanding patterns on a global scale. For them, the chain structure, in general, was outlined to be affected by three variables: how difficult the transactions are, how easily the transactions can be coded, and how well supplied the production base was (2006, 98). Gerefi et al. does address the need to look at a commodity chain where consumption informs the production process. He says, "Consumers are not passive. Consumer culture… can subvert the original intention of producers by altering, and ascribing meaning to products in ways that designers and marketers never intended" (2006, 98). The article addresses the need to go beyond just singular commodity chains and global commodity chains but to include institutional structures of governance that dictated the movement from production to consumption. He uses four different industries to articulate the point that access to developed markets is often linked via power asymmetry between developed markets developing ones. This theoretical framework shifts focus away from the commodity chain itself to include firms and global markets closely mirroring a center-periphery analysis.

Polanyi (1957) sets out two meanings of the term "economic," the formal and the substantive. The formal economies he refers to are situations where there are insufficient means that require action within a market system that is quantifiable by a price commodity. He says that this system has little importance when taken out of price-making markets. The substantive meaning of the economy is expressed as an empirical economy, or a process between man and nature/environment with wants to supply material means. He concludes this section by emphasizing the "human economy is embedded and enmeshed in institutions, economic and noneconomic" (1957, 250). Polanyi then goes into ideas of reciprocity, distribution, and exchange with various definitions, often contrasting with his ideas of "higgling and haggling," which “the element of antagonism, however, diluted, that accompanies this variant of exchange is ineradicable" (1957, 255). This, he explains, is the reason markets ban this
behavior in favor of early institutions. Polanyi makes a point to stay away from evolutionary theories of the economy as "stages of development." Trade, money forms, and market elements (institutions) are also defined and related to the "locus of exchange" as comprising of supply crowd or demand crowd (or both) (1957, 265).

Halperin (1994) discusses Polanyi's works and sets out two key concepts of movement in her work "Economy and Ecology," namely locational movements and approbation movements and their historical conceptualizations as well as their relationship. Locational movements, or "changing place," is said to inhabit ecological terms and breaks down into three main changes of spatial relationships;1. Transfers from one physical space to another; 2. Physical changes in the material stuff of livelihood and; 3. Energy transfers. Approbation movements are described as "changing hands" and occurs mostly in discussions of the economy and access to resources and labor. Two changes can occur with approbation movements as outlined by Halpern; 1. Organizational changes, and 2. Transfers of rights. Halperin gives a discussion of Polanyi and concedes that these two parts make up what is known as the formal model of economy. She gives interesting historical background on ecological and economic anthropology and discusses Marxist approaches but takes the position that livelihood cannot be reduced to ecological variables. She suggests using three steps for thinking about the construction of new research endeavors and suggests anthropologists firstly break down the material-means provision process into its parts of production, distribution, and consumption. Next, she suggests that they decide which component or components are of primary interest. Lastly, anthropologists must decide which movements are primary, locational, or appropriation. Halperin also explains there is a relationship between ecology and livelihood as well as ecology and economics and gives her definition of the economy as the material-means provisioning process in cultural systems. She concludes with a discussion of the synthesis of these two ideas and also the need to keep them analytically separate (Haperin 1994).

Anthropologists have a unique perspective on commodity chain analysis that differentiates itself from Gerefi et al. (2006). This is sometimes referred to as provisioning by anthropologists, like Narotzky, that takes the link between consumption and production to a larger scale by incorporated all the possible
processes that may happen along the chain (2012). The idea of provisioning comes originally from Polanyi's work Narotzky integrates this complex process of production, distribution, and appropriation of goods and services to be all-encompassing and terms this process "provisioning." She argues that provisioning improves consumption studies by expanding the discussion from either economic paradigms or meaning-centered consumption paradigms into a perspective that links these concepts while also taking into consideration organization and institutions. In this way, she feels that provisioning can be seen to understand economic systems in their entirety but also helps discover meanings and identities and the reproduction of these systems in society. She uses two examples in understanding the provisioning idea, using childcare and food provisioning. She considers the social and political forms of an organization while also bringing in historical forces that affect provisioning chains. Her analysis allows room for analyzing the state as a "system of provisioning" that is rooted in political power constructed throughout history (2012, 81). Provisioning also allows anthropologists to look at a wide variety of different paths in the acquisition of goods and shows how there are diverse options for provisioning, which she terms "modes of provisioning" (2012 82). Her analysis encompasses not only individuals navigating the provisioning path but also various market and non-market forms that these paths between production and consumption can take. Narotzky's provisioning adds to the anthropological study of commodities in that it shows various channels that regulate flows of commodities and also takes into account historical and political forces that stress provisioning paths.

Anthropologists have recently become interested in these commodity chain paradigms, specifically when they discuss the importance of consumption in the creation of commodities themselves. This involves work done by Carrier, who seeks to discover the underlying relationship that governs the difference between gifts and commodities. Carrier's book on economic anthropology (2012) traces anthropological themes between producers and consumers to uncover the underlying connections between gifts and commodities. The first part of the book traces how ethical consumption of commodities affects how individuals perceive their purchasing experience and elaborate on how purchasers create ideals of production processes based on ethical consumption. In many ways, ethical consumption links
producers and consumers, who will never meet each other, into a relationship that is purely based on the consumer's perception of purchasing the object itself. This has been shown in various articles written on the fair-trade movement (Carrier and Luetchford 2012).

Carrier and Heyman (1997) layout three common themes found within a political economy of consumption. Firstly, they discuss objects as symbolic markers, where consumers are alienated from producers, closely following Miller's work on commodity analysis. Next, they look at how commodity chains are organized according to time, my epochal orientation, which shows a parallel of the rise of capitalist commodities with national development in what is termed a "consumption community" (1997, 359). They also point out that some commodity chain analysis erases the concept of time altogether (Douglas and Isherwood 1979) or takes a human life trajectory as the tame frame of following production and consumption paths (Bourdieu 1984). Lastly, they delve into the questions of class and consumption, posing the question, would everyone want the same commodities if given access? Which pointed to a uni-dimensional view of objects and shared symbols, to which they postulate the answer to be no. Since each culture perceives symbols as different, this would also extend to a theory of commodities. This takes on a psycho-cultural view of consumption which closely connects to structural adaptations of commodity research. They then look at the household as a consumption pattern, where households are constrained by economic principles that cannot be solely analyzed in terms of cultural symbols. They conclude their analysis by proposing a larger frame of relationships between people and commodities, one that incorporates a political economy alongside cultural and aesthetic interpretations of commodity research.

Coming from a symbolic interpretation of culture, Douglas and Isherwood's (1979) theoretical framing of commodities treats the objects as signs of symbolic communication rather than on purely economic terms. Their article regarding commodity consumption lays out specific sign categories that work well with Douglas's proposed culture theory. Bourdieu (1984) also takes a symbolic approach to commodities in the form of consumption as maintenance for social structure, especially the ranking of individuals according to class based on commodity consumption. He outlines how commodities and
access to various forms of capital, culture, and education allow individuals to maintain and reproduce social hierarchies.

Fine (1994) also sees the cultural switch of consumption studies as devoid of economic and state influences. He notes how symbolic and cultural applications of consumption, in terms of Bourdieu, leave out outside influences that determine class status, such as media, in the creation of social categories. Fine notes that the cultural determinants have been the main focus while ignoring other influences on consumption such as economic and social ones. He notes this by saying, "the culture of consumption gains an undue autonomy from economic relations" (1994, 395). Fine later goes on to also stress the importance of state actors on the determinates of consumption, as most anthropological studies on consumption ignore outside influences for a "preoccupation with the individual and aesthetic" (1994, 395).

Miller contributes to this mentally framed literature in his writing on the consumption of commodities as objectification of the self, stemming from Hegel's notion of self-actualization via the acquisition of objects (Miller 1995). Millers' analysis puts forth a switch to consumption studies within anthropology has led to a "fundamental transformation in all aspects of the discipline" as anthropologists look towards mass consumption as meaning rather than earlier relationships of kinship and ethnicity that were foundational in self-identification (1995, 141). Miller's "Theory of Shopping" looks at how individual shopping practices create a moral framework based on cultural values that distinguish individuals within a certain ethos embedded in a larger imagined social framework (1998). Miller's work reveals that individuals purchase commodities based on value frameworks that exist in their culture, using the idea of thrift to explain how mothers may be positively framing their character based on how well they can find products on Sale. As Miller points out, the expenditure paid in relation to the expenditure saved is fantasied to the point where individuals buy commodities not for their monetary value but on the fantasy of what is being saved. This allows them to feel that being thrifty is a sign value of their intelligence of 'playing the game' against large multinational companies, as well as evidence of their domestic commitment to the household (Miller 1998, 103). Thriftiness is thus seen as an "economic
activity that is used to create a moral framework for the construction of value” (Miller 1998, 137). Through his examples, he shows how consumers put an importance on how buying products make them feel like a person, and thus he concludes that commodities have switched from producer to consumer importance (1995 143).

Mansfeld (2012) seeks to trace the anthropological contributions to studies of consumption by grouping theorists into one of five main approaches that exist in the literature. Her categories of obligation, ecology, symbolic, material, and historical are taken as her way of framing different approaches to consumption and commodity circulation. The categorical framing of commodity research into cultural paradigms helps to illuminate the "social embeddedness of consumption" that dictates cultural habits and social ordering.

Though many theorists focus on the flows and theories of the relationship of modes of production others, focus on the commodities themselves. This turns the analysis from human beings as central to relationships to an analysis based on the subject of objects and those objects' movement through space and time. One such framework uses relationships of production through the "eyes" of the object itself, as it transitions from hand to hand, relationship to relationship, structure to structure. In this way, the modes of economic exchange can or transition while the object itself stays central. Appadurai’s "The Social Life of Things" (1986) summarizes commodities as objects of economic value where the value is not within the object but created by people who are making judgments about the object that leads to its exchange (3). Appadurai believes that commodity "exchange is not a byproduct of the valuation of objects, but its source" and makes up all the things we find in contemporary material culture (1986, 4). Appadurai defines commodities as anything that is intended for exchange, though exchange can be broken down into forms such as commodity exchange, bartering, and gift exchange. Commodity exchanges are thought of as situations/contexts where commodities take on social life, or "commodity-hood," that can move in and out of states according to the calculated exchange (Appadurai 1986, 13). The exchange is related to the commodities regime of value, which is agreed upon by the social arenas of people that participate in the exchange context.
Objects can be shifted in and out of commodity hood by four productions: commodity by
destination, commodity by metamorphosis, commodity by diversion, and ex-commodities (Appadurai
1986, 15-16). Commodity consumption is symbolic of social relations that link consumption and
production and send social messages (Appadurai 1986, 31). Luxury goods are defined as commodities
whose use-value is rhetorical and social, (basically they are only for symbolic purposes) and are created
via social messages, restriction, and knowledge capital (Appadurai 1986, 38). Knowledge is also
discussed in terms of knowledge of commodities. Knowledge is needed for the proper production and
consumption of commodities, creating a commoditized knowledge system (1986, 44). Appadurai ends his
chapter by linking the production and consumption of commodities to politics: "politics is what links
value and exchange in the social life of commodities" (1986, 57). Appadurai gives a new interpretation of
commodity exchange, one built on the symbolic socio-cultural exchange of objects that form value
systems governed by politics (Appadurai 1986).

Besides being part of an economic process of production, exchange, and consumption,
commodity consumption at the same time is symbolic of social relations that link consumption and
production and send social messages to other people or groups in society (Appadurai 1986, 31; Bourdieu
1984). Politics and identity groups can also be based on Anderson's idea of imagined communities,
where social values are founded on the principles of limitation and sovereignty as well as groupings that
prescribe to similar ideologies, morals, or worldviews (Anderson 1983). The negotiation of ethical and
moral values is one way that classes can struggle over dominant representations of taste and class,
allowing them to become mobile in the hierarchy framework (Anderson 1983).

Politically charged imagined communities use symbolic and cultural capital to help sway the
morality and normality structures of societies. Bourdieu's (1984) Distinction lays out the framework of
how social classes negotiate their positioning on a hierarchy of consumerism that is based on taste and
other 'markers of class' that are integral to the cannabis economy. Symbolic capital, which is manifested
in individual preferences and personal characteristics, and social capital, or the prestige one gains from
connection to social networks or kinship networks. These forms of capital are consumed, acquired,
redistributed, and transmitted between different members to distinguish themselves in society (Bourdieu 1984).

In consequence, the commodity is created from social maneuver and follows a scheme of contrived symbolic, moral, and ethical prescriptions that enforce power through a shallow form of cultural goodwill. Luxury goods are defined as commodities whose use-value is rhetorical and social (Bourdieu's idea of "cultural capital") and are created via social messages, restriction, and knowledge capital (Appadurai 1986, 38; Bourdieu 1984). For Appadurai, knowledge is also discussed in terms of the knowledge of commodities, where this knowledge is needed for the proper production and consumption of commodities, creating a commoditized knowledge system (1986, 44). Appadurai also emphasizes the link between the production and consumption of commodities to politics when he says that "politics is what links value and exchange in the social life of commodities" (1986, 57). Appadurai gives a new interpretation of commodity exchange, one built on the symbolic socio-cultural exchange of objects that form value systems governed by politics.

Commodity chain analysis is starting to make more of an impact on anthropology as a discipline. Most notable contributions include Sidney Mintz's (1985) analysis of the global production and consumption of sugar along with Tsing's analysis of Matsutake mushrooms (2013). Mintz immediately reflects on the importance of participant observation and historical contextualization to the overall analysis of cultural change specific to sugar (1985). He feels that his participant observation in the Caribbean influenced his perception of the myriad of relationships associated with production, consumption, and the power of sugar. The documentation of sugar shows the consequences of unbridled consumption and the economic, societal, and industrial impacts that the production of a commodity can have on different cultures around the world. As he notes, "What could be less anthropological than the historical examination of a food that graces every modern table?" (1985, xxvii) He also feels strongly about creating analysis based on historical contexts, explaining relationships based on current existing social systems divorces the process from time and therefore does not allow one to see how the characteristic form of sugar evolved. Sugars overall easy adaptability into many different food groups
allowed people to integrate it into a variety of cultural practices that we can distinguish as stereotypical of British society, such as tea, coffee, and deserts. Mechanical and chemical advancements to the extraction process of sugar is a scientific phenomenon that dictates how, when, and whom can be involved in the production and consumption. Mintz also looks at how consumers create social identities in their consumption process by saying that "our capacity to symbolize, to endow anything with meaning and then act in terms of that meaning, is similarly universal and intrinsic to our nature" (1985, 153-154). He feels that dietary complexes of society carry specific symbolic loads as a product of consumption. He argues that the consumption of sugar transformed into symbolism for social class, cultural identity, changing traditions, and overall, the fabric of daily social life. The symbolism of sugar is abundantly clear both within the British aristocracy that used sugar as a bourgeoisie power concept of luxury, and later as it transformed interclass profit struggle into a proletariat necessity.

Anna Tsing’s (2013) contribution also sought to delve into issues of property rights, common-pool resources, and gift/commodity transitions. Tsing holds that the value inherent in the commodity is made through non-capitalist relationships, which make it difficult to separate gift-giving from commodity exchange. She takes a Marxian view of commodities but adds a dimension of gift exchanges, thus giving commodities different relationships and use values as different types of objects (Tsing 2013, 23). She explains this process through the production, distribution, and consumption of the Matsutake mushroom. The Matsutake mushrooms grow in forests that depend on public activity to irrigate the soil until properly grown. The public who help the production process of the mushroom are then barred from profiting off the mushrooms themselves, despite being grown on public land (Tsing 2013, 33). During the collection process, private companies close off sections of the public forest for picking, allowing them to collect profits from a commodity technically defined as a common pool resource (public lands). This has created trust and patronage between the contractors who hunt for the mushrooms and local village leaders who hold the power of access outlined by government regulations (Tsing 2013, 34). Wholesalers are then seen as matchmakers who relate specific mushrooms to buyers and have the power to enact value on quality based on picking standards. Then once purchased, the mushroom is often given as a gift to others,
enacting its powerful force as a relationship builder. This ethnographic encounter shows how the mushroom transforms between gift and commodity, and on a macro-scale, how "capitalism always requires non-capitalist social relations to accomplish its goals" (Tsing 2013, 37).

As presented, there has been a great deal of commodity research coming from outside of the anthropological discipline that has laid out a previous framework for analyzing the relationship between production and consumption. We saw how some anthropologists had adopted the idea of provisioning, from Polanyi, to understand commodities in the movement to take on a holistic view of the economy by addressing social, historical, and political processes in relation to the production, distribution, and consumption of commodities. Others take the approach of a global commodity chain that brings forth global economic inequalities and analysis how surplus capital in the form of profits is unequally distributed between developed and developing markets. The GVC takes on firms and institutions as influential entities that determine and govern the movement of capital and commodities through various networks. Some theorists may take the commodity chain (cc) approach to commodities, following singular objects through the process from start to finish and in and out of human categories of gifts and commodities. Through studying how objects move around in society within different frameworks, anthropologists can uncover the social and economic significance of the relationship between objects and human lifeworlds.

Conclusion

By locating my approach in and elaborating upon an anthropological political economy, in this dissertation I take the notion of “commodity in transition” from Tsing and expand that by adding the idea of “markets in transition.” Cannabis can be traced as a commodity through the legal and illegal networks surrounding the commodity, but what happens when the commodity, as well as its market system, is, transitioning at the same time? Since commodity transitions also change social relationships, this work expands on a labor theory of value to include commodity and market regulations as foundational to social relationship changes. As Tsing argues, the material form of the commodity itself may not change, but the
social and economic factors around it do, and thus, the commodity itself takes on new significance, new meanings, and new economic and political status. In this same way, the dealer of cannabis might not change their practice, yet with changing social, economic, and political factors, the cannabis dealer of yesterday is not the same as the cannabis dealer of today.

Whether we call them drug-dealers or budtenders, the role of the cannabis supplier changes according to its social and economic frameworks. In this way, both cannabis and its forms and routes of production, distribution, exchange, consumption, and marketization have changed the whole ensemble of social relationships are made reputable for the legal, free market. This “rebranding” of cannabis into a health and wellness commodity – along with its producers, distributors, sellers, and consumers – allows for a transition from a “bad” and “illegal” object/person to a “good” “legal” one. Once this transition from illegal to legal has taken hold amongst the public, the need for positive connotations with cannabis and dealers evaporates as legal, free-market capitalism takes over the industry. Once the object has been successfully entered into public consumption, capital market systems do what they were designed to do – create high-profit margins and low production costs. In this way, the recreational market embodies the capital market system, which avoids value-based restrictions and allows consumers to use market freedoms to determine the cost and regulation of legal products.

It is not enough just to study how commodities transition from one state to the next, from one status to the next. It is also important to identify how individuals linked with those commodities transition with them in society. In this state of transition, what happens to the dealer after the cannabis has been dealt with? How have the dealer’s lives been re-branded, transitioned, and exists in a state of flux dependent on the complex ways in which a commodity changes economic, political, and symbolic status? Just as cannabis is undergoing a transition as a commodity, so are the dealers who are expected to engage in a transition as well.

The social life of the “thing” also dictates the social life of the profit. Therefore, commodity research should include a more focused look at the consequences of the commodity transition that occurs for the people and labor involved. Furthermore, since each commodity chain is vastly different according
to economic, not to say political, context, a theory of commodity chain analysis within a political economy framework also needs to take into account regional cultural productions that differentiate its chain from other legal frameworks. This dissertation represents some of the first qualitative research on the production and consumption of a newly formed market system and therefore provides a starting point for academics to further the theory of cannabis commodity research and how newly formed markets may change the very fabric of a local economy. It also provides further theoretical insights into how people imagine their positions within a transitionary market.
CHAPTER THREE:
RESEARCH METHODS

Anthropology’s contribution to the social sciences often lies in its unique research methodology that focuses on qualitative data gathering alongside quantitative data. The hallmark of the discipline lies in ethnography, a form of research heavily based on qualitative forms such as participant observation, event analysis, and interviewing of participants. Research for this dissertation took place between the summer of 2016 and the winter of 2020, where I took part in participant observation of cannabis events in the Denver-metro area and interviewed participants who were connected to the cannabis industry. Relying on personal previous medical budtending experience in 2014, I also returned to the recreational budroom in 2020 for firsthand experience on how inside the budroom had changed and the difference between a medical and recreational dispensary. This chapter focuses on the relevant methodology used pertaining to this study and further expands on the rationale behind each proposed method in its contribution to anthropological research broadly.

Archival Data

Research began with the collection of archival data from History Colorado, which encompasses the state's archival history, historical museums, and historical education programs. Since legalization is still in process as I write this dissertation, there remains somewhat of a void in the academic literature specific to social science research in Colorado. Areas in the west have had a long history of settlement that has changed over the course of the past few hundred years. These changes have been based on government policies and development programs that have impacted the community. Colorado has a variety of historical museums to use as archival research centers, including the History Colorado Center, a
hands-on museum accompanied by a research/archival center full archival of photographs, moving images, and collecting stories. Archival research for anthropologists includes qualitative and quantitative materials that the researcher stores and records for official purposes for the thesis/dissertation process and applied projects (Angrosino 2016, 64). These kinds of records are invaluable resources. I collected newspapers, maps, photographs, marketing pamphlets, educational pamphlets, and magazines that have been used in this dissertation to trace the socio-economic and institutional change in Colorado. The History Colorado Center also employs many archaeologists and anthropologists and looks over historic houses-turned-museums in the area that cater to cannabis tourism (History Colorado Center n.d.). Obtaining historical information directly related to cannabis production and consumption was invaluable in mounting evidence surrounding the theme of the research.

Key Informant Interviews

Oral discourse is the act of looking for shared understanding amongst a group of people and exploring those themes through semi-structured interviews (Michrina and Richards 2016, 49-52; LeCompte and Schensul 2013a, 192). In choosing key informants, I looked at domains and factors within the cannabis industry and located where individuals were along the commodity chain. This helped guide the beginning stages of the research. Due to the nature of the product, money nor cannabis was exchanged as compensation for interviews, though I found myself often providing a complimentary beverage or meal to my informants as an informal enticement to be interviewed. In order to avoid some of the pitfalls of working in informal networks and within private industries, there should be a strong emphasis on anonymity and rapport with informants. Gaining rapport with industry leaders and speaking with cannabis consumers helped utilize a snowball technique/chain referral for gathering more participants. Gatekeepers include the corporate managers and dispensary owners, and individuals with an already established reputation in the industry. For individual interviews, a focus on lifestyle domains such as education, community, work-life, and family was important in locating participants in their respective position in the chain. This was considered a stratified sample as the researcher studied a key subpopulation (cannabis
budtenders) to compare between-group and in-group variance (Bernard 2011, 117-118). It was also helpful to collect information on narratives of cannabis experience and rites of passage such as first-time consuming, first legal purchase, or first illegal sale. Transcriptions of the interviews were developed, and the researcher analyzed and coded the information gleaned from the interviews to determine patterns and develop a theory of the phenomenon described by participants. Techniques such as cultural domain analysis were used to link certain socio-cultural themes together to eventually build conceptual models, or what anthropologists’ term “cultural schema” (Bernard 2011, 299; Ortner 1990).

**Participant Observation and Field Notes**

Participant Observation, or “stalking culture in the wild,” was used to provide the study with details on social interactions and environmental context and included field notes from cannabis events, interviews, cannabis tours, cannabis tourist stops, and informal conversations (Bernard 2011). I used both a field notebook and a personal journal (physical and digital) to collect this data. The field notebook contained observations surrounding interviews, events, and general participant observation. The journal provided a reflective space for gauging progress and for exploring issues related to interpersonal relationships (Michrina and Richards 2016, 67).

In writing field notes, I have tried to follow the traditions of ethnographic writing and anthropological research. The common theme of cannabis consumption helped center a collage of information and quotes relating to the topic. Lived experience and “thick description” have helped me build a story based on historical processes and political-economic forces in the United States in general, and Colorado specifically (Michrina and Richards 2016, 115). Due to the private nature of many of the cannabis events, I did not conduct formal interviews during participant observation, but tried to form a generalized understanding of the event. From this, I cross-referenced participant interviews to add to the description of cannabis events and tourist activities.
Mixed Methods

Making mental maps of cannabis “hot spots” within areas of Denver helped me understand consumer culture and demand. Anthropologists typically compile more information for data analysis programs such as Statistical Package for the Social Sciences or Geographic Information Systems (LeCompte and Schensul 2013, 174). Mapping, for example, of heavy user consumption patterns within a 30-day time frame could also potentially implemented to uncover themes and economic patterns (Michrina and Richards 2016, 87; LeCompte and Schensul 2013, 130). This would not only help to understand individual patterns of use but would also provide a reflective experience for users to track their frequency, intensity, and practice. Findings from this kind of research could also be used to help create information on consumer insights and help improve products or marketing schedules, as only two examples. Descriptive statistics of sales, tax, and consumer demographics can all be visually represented to show socio-cultural trends and relationships. I have not engaged in this kind of research, however. I mention it here in order to illustrate possible applications for those future researchers interested in behavior related to commercial cannabis production and consumption.

Legal Implications of Ethnographic Fieldwork

Due to the patchwork framework of cannabis legality, interaction with illegal practices is more common in the study of cannabis than in other private sectors of the economy. Much of this illegal practice is domicile and politically framed, such as illegal grow houses, but there still exists the potential for harm due to cannabis’s federal illegality as a controlled substance. Anthropologists faced with these situations often refer to the American Anthropological Association’s (AAA) Code of Ethics (2012) which sets out six basic guidelines for social science research. These include 1. Do no harm; 2. Be open and honest regarding your work; 3. Obtain informed consent and necessary permissions, 4. Weigh competing ethical obligations; 5. Make your results accessible; and 6. Protect and preserve your records. It is easy to see how these basic guidelines may be problematic with respect to grey markets. “Do no harm” is confusing as it does not outline for whom, by whom, and on what scale of space and time. Being open
and honest can be difficult or ambiguous during il/legal fieldwork when the position of the anthropologist should not be spoken about or informed in dangerous situations. Obtaining necessary permissions can also be problematic, as il/legal networks have various levels of unstructured legality. For anthropologists working within il/legal networks, having the foresight to think through various contexts and courses of action is one of the most constructive ways to avoid dangerous and harmful situations in the field. In order to give a holistic ethical and legal picture, values of participants involved, and possible legal repercussions must be weighed.

The relevant values of the investigator are to maintain professionalism as a researcher in the cannabis economy (il/legal research) and to correct and improve methodological and ethical standards while in the field both for current and future research on cannabis. The researcher should be committed to preserving future opportunities for academic work on the topic of cannabis and, in doing so, should try to avoid being directly involved in situations that could have legal ramifications (present and future). The researcher should be committed to following ethical standards set out by the AAA and also state law. The reputation of the individual researcher and the institution is a concerning factor in the ethical methodology of the research.

**Protecting Research Subjects**

The research subjects, including budtenders, out-of-state tourists, informal network actors, all need to continue to “survive” in and outside of Colorado by participation in informal market systems. They are vulnerable in many different ways. They are at risk of losing their legal cannabis positions or “day job” positions if they are caught by law enforcement and could also face possible jail time or legal sanctions depending on the severity of the charge and other factors. Many workers in the industry are financially vulnerable in that they are often working a low-income job position and socially vulnerable due to their il/legal activity. There also is the potential for physical violence due to the fact that the industry is often the target of armed robberies due to the cash economy. Dispensaries have seen a
significant rise in crime in the past three years, with five robberies and 122 burglaries being reported in the year 2019 alone. (Riccardi 2020).

The relevant values of the community were to see cannabis legalization continue to be on the table at a federal level and to further the social transformation of values in society integral for that to happen. The community’s goal is to decrease systemic violence of drug industries, reform the prison system, and have access to medications if they are of value. Society also wants to protect children under the age of 18 who may look to cannabis use as positively framed from media outlets leading to cannabis use as socially “cool,” which may increase the chances of fantasizing about the occupation of a “drug dealer.”

After discussing the values that are at risk during fieldwork in the cannabis market system, laying out possible courses of action was the next logical step. When faced with illegal activity, where harm may or may not occur to the researcher or participants, it is important to think through possible actions that the researcher can take, and the consequences of those actions. Harmful illegal activity could include, but is not limited to, situations of illegal drug use leading to one or more serious medical issues, administering questionable substances to minors, money laundering or financial misrepresentation, and transportation of commodities over state lines, willingly or unwillingly.

Firstly, the researcher could have simply done nothing and let the autonomy of decision-making of individuals outweigh other values of “justice” and “do no harm” that the researcher has. By doing nothing, the ethnographer abides by most of the AAA code of ethics and maintains professionalism and rapport within participant networks. Personally, the researcher may feel deeply conflicted knowing that her actions are contributing to illegal sales (to other states or minors) and thus becomes an active participant in weakening the system in the short term. The information gathered during some interactions was not ethical to publish as all informants (tertiary contacts) in the interaction may not have prior knowledge of the research objectives or consent.

Another option for the researcher would be to involve a third party when confronted with illegal and/or harmful activity. This could be done by taking off the anthropologist “hat” and either operating as
a concerned citizen or a concerned employee. Depending on the specific context and level of harm, institutions could be contacted, such as the Marijuana Enforcement Division of Colorado, local police, legal representatives, the Drug Enforcement Agency, or other federal/state divisions. The researcher is obligated to contact the appropriate services when someone is in medical need and may suffer irreparable harm. This whistleblowing activity may put the researcher and subjects in further harm. This would also be in direct contradiction to the AAA guidelines as it goes against autonomy, privacy, informed consent, etc. Choosing this option would be staying in line with societal values such as abiding by the rule of law, helping law enforcement, and generally “doing the right thing” when faced with people who are about to commit a crime. At the same time, the researcher’s main goal is not to be the whistleblower for individual cases, nor to paint the industry off as complete chaos. Outing “bad apples” may have unintended consequences of hurting the growth of the industry and gives those who oppose cannabis more evidence for prohibition. When replacing the commodity with another product, or comparison of similar law-breaking situations, one can see how this becomes difficult to weigh values, as a typical person may not care if a couple was smuggling alcohol into “dry” counties, but the same couple may call the police if they knew another type of crime was about to be committed, like if a bank was about to be robbed.

The researcher has the option to step remove herself from the situation altogether and research from a perspective outside the illegal market without being directly involved in the sale of cannabis. If the researcher does not work from within either the legal or illegal system, the access to inside information would be limited in scope due to countless state and federal privacy regulations as customers are still seen as “patients” in the eye of the law. The researcher would not be able to take the Malinowski approach and not only hear what people say, but then match that with individual actions (Malinowski 1921). Many strategies and loopholes are so specific to expert knowledge (similar to white-collar crime) it is difficult to trace and regulate the nuances that end up being the biggest problems. In order to collect information, one might have to consider rumors or secondary sources entirely. Employees and customers are already extremely suspicious of “outsiders,” and finding gatekeepers and informants within these channels may be hard or dangerous for the researcher.
John Osburg’s article (2013) discussing his ethnographic work within the Chinese criminal underworld, Heishe Hui, has strong parallels to the ethical considerations within cannabis research. Many economic networks work within these boundaries of binary opposition where illegal/legal and illicit/licit labels are only useful as two points on a spectrum of intertwined fields of power. Fatty, one of Osburg’s mafia informants, says simply, “you know, in China, there is no law. Relationships are the law,” and thus parallel activity may be drawn between economic systems that lack strong state regulation and intervention (Osburg 2013). Osburg warns that anthropologists are uniquely positioned to take part in illegal networks because of the seduction of the ethnographic experience and getting the “inside” narrative. Being aware of ethnographic seduction allows the researcher to disallow his informants to gain power over his actions via reciprocal exchange for “insider” information and also helps the anthropologist to be aware of how his own physicality and embodied social capital as a researcher. His/her presence can potentially benefit the legitimacy of power that the informal network needs to be sustainable. This “courtship for instrumental purposes” occurs when members of the mafia make themselves out to be victims of circumstance and freedom fighters against a cruel world. Osburg shows how he concurrently empathized with his constituents, which could be framed as a marginalized ex-peasant who pulled himself up by his bootstraps under a chaotic and oppressive regime, yet also saw them as proponents of terror and corruption fueled by violence and intimidation. This ethnography relates to illegal network studies in that the researchers must decide if constituents are “worthy of relativistic sympathy” or if the researcher is being ethnographically seduced by strategically calculated narratives (Osburg 2013).

“Anthropologists are not detectives, and we are trained to hold anthropologist-informant relations as a sacred trust. But surely this does not mean that one has to be a bystander to international crimes against vulnerable populations,” says Scheper-Hughes (1995, 419). Scheper-Hughes defends the position of an activist anthropologist in the face of illegal fieldwork, arguing for a more humanistic approach to cultural relativity and challenging anthropologists on their basic principles of participant observation and do no harm. She argues that morality presupposes culture, and thus no cultural action can be void of some type of human morality structure (Scheper-Hughes 1995). Scheper-Hughes feels that documentation and
observation can be weak, forming an artificial “moral relativism” that allows anthropologists to use a “waiting” technique, essentially absolving all human responsibility. Scheper-Hughes also argues against the idea of “watching and waiting” in ethically ambiguous situations. Scheper-Hughes shares her own feeling on human responsibility, saying that researchers should call out evil where it exists as it is fundamentally inherent in human nature. She expands by saying that if anthropologists ignore seemingly evil behavior, they are contributing to its power instead of “staring back at it, to speak truth to its power. What are we passively waiting for?” (Scheper-Hughes 1995, 416).

Scheper-Hughes calls on anthropologists to be “barefoot” anthropologists, moving beyond the spectator position who simply observe situations of unequal power, but to “witness” the acts as a grounding of the moral relationship that presupposes the structure of spoken word. To further clarify this point, she articulates, “the fearless spectator is accountable to ‘science’; the witness is accountable to history” (Scheper-Hughes 1995, 419). This position leads the researcher to liberate oneself of the “chameleon-like ambidexterity of the politically uncommitted anthropologist,” which leads to an emotionally invested position in the field. As she notes, this position often puts the researcher in danger, as she herself points out her political opponents threatened her life to the point that she was forced to leave the field site due to concerns over her safety (Scheper-Hughes 1995, 421). Nonetheless, if we are constantly making quick ethical decisions in real-time that are dangerous, then subjectivity is allowed to reign free without being balanced by opposing positions. Is there a middle way between the two hardpoints where the researcher is neither a “detached and passive” anthropology nor a “barefoot anthropologist?”

Lee D. Hoffer’s ethnography Junkie Business (2016) illustrates how two homeless men selling heroin in Denver rose through the hierarchical ranks to form a small business venture. The construction of their illegal enterprise allowed them to dramatically improve their material standard of living, yet ultimately destroyed all of their friendships in the process. Hoffer had developed the rapport of two street heroin addicts through unstructured interactions working on a previous social network study on HIV/AIDS prevention. Hoffer found that treating his informants “normal” without stepping over their
boundaries and acting as a social worker was the best way to gain rapport. He realized through the
process that he was unable to ultimately change their behavior, yet with genuine friendships, he felt he
could provide advice and help when asked.

Hoffer’s research intensified into several semi-structured interviews with categorized topical
questions. The author felt that the research should be conducted as several checkup sessions where
“current events” were discussed and recorded in a field notebook to uncover the process of how “heroin
dealing existed in the decisions, transaction, and relationships that occurred between dealers and
customers” (Hoffer 2016, 15). Through the process, the researcher became a “quasi member of drug
injection networks” (Hoffer 2016, 13). The researcher-participant relationship fundamentally changed
when the business became so financially stable that the subjects refused the interview fees altogether
(Hoffer 2016, 14).

The ethnography demonstrates how two homeless addicts can build a corporate distribution
network by employing the use of credit and debt from customers (friends) in conjunction with a strategic
pricing structure. The business eventually fails when it cannot scale itself properly, as the hierarchical
structure became unreliable due to demographical challenges from working with addicts. The
ethnography ends grimly, with one of the partners dead on the couch from an overdose, and the other
shortly after disappears (Hoffer 2016, 104). The ethnographer describes needing to take time away from
his research after feeling emotionally drained and exhausted, leading him into a depression (Hoffer 2015,
103-111). The ethnography serves as a reminder of the personal cost that researchers take on when
creating genuine relationships with informants working in il/legal networks.

To conclude, illegal, il/legal, and legal ethnographic research on cannabis seems to be fraught
with ethical and legal considerations. These three terms are used to describe differing levels of cannabis
legal and political sanctions that govern its production and consumption. This includes completely
informal and black market production and consumption of cannabis (illegal), legal state markets that
operate under illegal national ones (il/legal such as found in Colorado and other legal states that are
operating under national illegality), and purely legal markets (that will need national legalization to fully
operate). Using a guide to help the researcher critically think through ethical situations has proven to be an invaluable resource in preparation for fieldwork. The literature presented tries to establish some of the concerns of illegal ethnographic fieldwork in relation to some of the codes of the profession given by the AAA. The exercise can be extrapolated to encompass other ethical considerations that the researcher may encounter in applied research of cannabis in the future.

Fieldwork Experience

Fieldwork spanned between the years of 2016 and 2020, at differing levels of intensity and engagement. Before entering my doctoral program, I had been an office manager and budtender at a small medical cannabis facility from January to August of 2014. This is where I had experienced some of the hardships that budtenders went through and was the catalyst experience for pursuing this dissertation. In the fall of 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, I found an opportunity to return to a dispensary as a front-desk employee. The pandemic caused many job losses, including mine, as the college that I was adjunct teaching at had shut down all non-essential classes and staff members. Since dispensaries were considered “emergency services,” there were still a plethora of jobs available in the industry, and I was uniquely qualified to jump into the fast-paced environment. Instead of budtending, I found that working at the front desk allowed me to observe customers, budtenders, and management without selling any products to consumers. This was important for me as I had previous experience that led me to question some of my own personal and professional ethical standards while selling cannabis products to consumers. The six weeks that I worked at the large recreational dispensary in 2020 allowed me to compare and contrast my previous experience working in a small medical facility early on in legalization. Gatekeepers (hiring manager, store manager) in both dispensaries were aware of my history as an educator and student during the hiring process, and all names, brands, and situations have been suitably changed to allow for anonymity. Furthermore, all interviewed budtender names were changed to protect anonymity, with pseudonyms were randomly chosen from a list of famous Coloradans in history. Working in the industry five years after my initial position in the cannabis industry further solidified my
personal and professional views. I was being exploited as an industry worker, while also participating in
the exploitation of others. This weighed heavily on me, and I eventually had to leave the position due to
the daily injustice that I witnessed.

This personal experience working within the industry as an insider was complimented by weekly
visits to dispensaries in and around the Denver-metro area. These visits allowed me to look at the wide
range of branding tactics, pricing strategies, and typologies that different dispensaries represented. As
dispensaries closed, and new ones popped up, it became abundantly clear how marketing schemes had
changed so quickly just a few years after recreational legalization. Weekly visits allowed me to track
changes in the dispensaries over a large range of time, for example, the slow and deliberate decline of
medical sales and strains over the years. It also allowed me to gain rapport with budtenders as an outside
consumer and lead me to ask informal questions about what their dispensary and product were like. I
believe if I had not held a medical marijuana access card supplied by the Medical Enforcement Division
(MED) of Colorado early on in medical legalization, it would have been more difficult to frame an
accurate picture if I had not had access to the medical market before recreational legalization.

The majority of budtenders I interviewed were obtained through snowball sampling or while
working, shopping, or visiting with other like-minded individuals connected to the cannabis industry.
Once I was officially “cleared” by the interviewee, they were more than willing to ask their friends to also
provide interviews. Due to the nature of the conversation, many budtenders were more than willing to talk
about their consumption and occupation.

Though many anthropologists are concerned about how they might meet informants and assure
them the anthropologist will protect their anonymity, in my study, most participants were more than
willing to participant in the study as they simply did not believe I was an academic. I tried to remedy this
by giving them formal paperwork provided by the University of South Florida’s Institutional Review
Board (IRB), explaining the study and its components, but these pieces of paper did not add to the general
trustworthiness of the interaction. This is most likely due to the nature of industry workers who are not
strangers to participating in illegal activity. Not only did a piece of paper not sway their “intuition” about
my status, once the confusing word of “anthropology” came into existence, but most of the participants also stopped asking questions entirely, as one participant noted, “Hmmmm. That seems like you just made that up yourself.”

While conducting fieldwork, I made sure to inform my potential informants about my dual roles. They were suspicious: Why would an academic be there working with them? Surely, they must be lying since they are working for such a low wage. There was a period where I asked informal network dealers about their opinions on the legal market both in-state and out of state, and when I did, I had considerable trouble in talking with informal actors who assumed I was law enforcement. Since I was a white female in her early thirties, I fit the description of a typical undercover police officer and often looked more like a young professional rather than their normal clientele. Even when explaining to them this study, “anthropology” seemed something “made up” and caused paranoia. This was also true of people with whom I had established rapport. Even though they had gotten to know me for a few months, had been to my house, and had seen my IRB informed consent formal paperwork, some of my questions, especially about finances, made people understandably uncomfortable. Regardless of our personal friendships and trust in the study, many still chose to err on the side of caution as not participating did not hurt them or put them at a disadvantage in any way. In these instances, I respected their decision and understood their position in the situation. I am not sure I would have been a willing participant if someone I knew approached me.

Some participants agreed to be interviewed but were very wary of being recorded, understandably so. Some did not want to be recorded whatsoever while other budtenders asked me to stop the recorder and go “off-record,” especially when talking about techniques and shortcuts taken at work. I found they were much more receptive to speaking if I also “incriminated” myself in some way during our interview by admitting on the tape that I, too, had done something that was not above board. In these cases, I would say a few sentences on the recorder and this put them at ease. Conversations after this were more trust-based as if they were saying, “if I get caught, so do you,” which is key in an illegal cannabis economy to
start with. It makes sense that these trust commitments have spilled over to the legal cannabis economy, as the informal economy is still strong and works in tandem with the legal economy.

What participants were not willing to say on the record, was backed up by other similar sentiments online. Due to the perceived anonymity of online message boards and social media platforms, people are much more willing to discuss their actions and opinions, especially around other like-minded anonymous people. One strategy that I used was hearing a technique or idea from an informant and then searching that specific thing online to see if this was a common practice. This was especially helpful in creating a cultural schema that was missing some components or legitimacy. For example, though I have come in contact with cannabis tourists during fieldwork, it is inconvenient to track down and try and interview a person while they are on vacation, especially if they are thinking about taking back any product to their home state. Likewise, it is frowned upon to approach strangers whose mental capacity may be compromised as ask them for an interview. It was much easier to hear firsthand accounts from cannabis tourists online after they had returned home.

It was difficult throughout the fieldwork to run into young migrant budtenders who were living in poor conditions. When visiting budtender acquaintances within their homes, it was difficult to see other conditions in which they lived. For example, one participant's apartment consisted of one small room in an urban-suburban area of Denver. Half of the room was covered with a large grow tent, with at least six cannabis plants in large planters accompanied by the heavy grow lights. There was barely enough room for a small couch and a mattress on the floor in the other half of the room. It was a substandard living situation considering they needed to be able to sleep, shower, and relax all while they lived in their own home-grow house. It was obvious these new transplants had nothing to spare with their paychecks, at minimum wage in an expensive urban city. It was also very apparent that their immediate economic needs were often the justifications for selling cannabis outside to the black market and the reason from their home-grows in the first place. It has always been difficult to deal with situations of economic poverty, wage injustice, and economic inflation when weighed against felony illegality like interstate schedule I drug trades. However, I took my position as a researcher to accurately document the lived experience of
budtenders during this transition period in hopes of further advancing legislation to protect these vulnerable labor positions in the future.

Another difficult issue in the last part of the fieldwork was the advent of COVID-19. Colorado was considered a “hot spot” for infectious outbreaks, which put a hold on tourism and face-to-face interviews altogether. This led me to rethink the process of face-to-face interviews, for screen-to-screen ones using Zoom and Skype. There was a distinct shift in tone in these interviews. Instead of just two people sharing or swapping stories, it turned much more formal, resembling a job interview rather than an informal conversation, and greatly inhibited the rapport with participants.

The fieldwork was bound by the state lines, and therefore travel and access to sites outside of Denver were fairly easy to access. Within Colorado, the study took on a holistic multi-site research approach. I also went to other legal, established dispensaries and to extra-ordinary dispensaries around the state trying to request interviews. Extra-ordinary dispensaries included “one of a kind” experiences, such as dispensaries with drive-thru windows and self-automated vending machines, and in these cases, I found it necessary to travel to see them firsthand. I also participated in a variety of social and cultural events around the city that brought together cannabis aficionados with the general public.

Event analysis, participant observation, and data gathering occurred between 2015 and 2020. This allowed me to compare trends and attitudes throughout the legalization process and also track the economic industry as other states began to legalize. For example, I attended the Civic Center Park 4/20 celebration over four years which allowed me to compare and contrast the event throughout time. During these events, I would put a recorder in my clothing and dictate out loud things that I noticed happening around me, which created a verbal ethnographic journal. Fieldwork at these occasions needed to be somewhat flexible, as a physical notebook and writing would be out of character for such an event. Photo documentation and live video were also taken during events. Since the advent of the smartphone, documentation, recreationally or academically, has made it easier to use these devices in public spaces as they have become the norm in our live-streaming techno-worlds. This also made it easier to cross-reference events with footage found on various internet websites that also live-streamed the events.
I also participated in the Cannabis Cup when it came to Denver and other cannabis trade shows. Further, I accompanied cannabis tourists in activities such as cannabis bus tours that allowed non-locals to share in the legal cannabis industry and talk about their opinions in a face-to-face environment. In these situations, the participant observation felt closer to a focus group, where participants are gathered to discuss a specific topic and be observed, as we were together in some type of shared experience. After attending two cannabis bus/van tours, I independently followed up each “stop” at a later time to follow up on a more in-depth in the analysis. The bus tours are represented in the cannabis tourism chapter as an amalgamation of different experiences one can find while on these tours in the style of Geertz’s thick description (1972).

In addition, I also participated in speaking with university students and listening to their final projects, for the course Cannabis Cultures at the University of Colorado, Denver, taught by Dr. Marty Otañez, which allowed for a conversational exchange of ideas on the connection between anthropology and cannabis. I also took part in educational events surrounding cannabis workers and occupational health that furthered my understanding of workplace issues that are unique to cannabis workers.

For this study, the author collected 33 semi-formal interviews with current and former budtenders that worked specifically in Colorado. Of these interviews, 12 were audio recorded in their entirety (1-3 hours) and transcribed from start to finish. Four interviews lasted three hours, three interviews were recorded from 1-2 hours, and five interviews were 45-1 hour in length. The other interviews were comprised of conversations that budtenders had with the researcher and amongst themselves before, during, and after their budtending shifts. These conversations could not be officially recorded as this was in violation of dispensary policy. There is no formal limit to the age that dispensary workers can be, provided they are over 21 years of age. The demographics of this study skew to the younger crowd, with the average age of participants studied at 28.07 years old. Gender within the dispensary was roughly equal, with more female personnel working as budtenders and front desk, rather than in management positions. Out of the 33 budtenders interviewed, 14 of them were women, 13 were men, and six decided not to identify. Diversity among participants was also skewed- there was more participation among white
non-Hispanic budtenders (17 participants) than those of other ethnicities (Black=4; Hispanic=5; Other=3, Non-identify=4). In terms of education, two participants out of 33 had obtained a master’s degree, nine had college degrees, five had technical or a two-year college degree, and 17 had a GED or high school diploma.

This sub-sample of budtenders should also be compared to larger data sets that focus on budtenders in the United States. As of 2021, Leafly.com reported that there are over 321,000 full-time positions in the cannabis sector nationwide, with roughly 35,500 of them residing in Colorado alone. Since the US Department of Labor prohibits counting state-level cannabis positions, Leafy has taken it upon themselves to acquire the information themselves via Whitney Economics, a consulting firm. (Leafly.com 2021.) Their research shows that Colorado is the per-capita lead in Cannabis sales among states that have legalized, and sales have increased by 71% in 2020 overall due to “pandemic purchasing.” Cannabis consumers already frequenting dispensaries also increased their overall consumption by spending on average 33% more per month on cannabis. At the same time, the pandemic allowed for fewer employees within the dispensaries themselves as social distancing and occupancy limits restricted the number of employees able to work at any given time.

Conclusion

As an anthropologist in a transitioning sector of the economy, one must be flexible in the approach and be willing to make participants comfortable with the questions being asked. Especially when dealing with illegal activity, special care should be taken when approaching participants, and rapport and trust may be hard to obtain. In the end, this study does not benefit them in the short term, and thus, their participation is merely an act of goodwill on their part that puts them at unnecessary risk.
CHAPTER FOUR:
PRODUCTION: FROM SEED TO SALE

To address the research question, “What is the nature of the cannabis commodity chain in Colorado?” various methodologies were used to create an accurate picture of the cannabis commodity chain, including an analysis of the commodity chain from participant observation taken on cannabis production tours, ethnographic data sourced from working in the industry, and archival research from both print materials as well as cannabis cultivation courses. Since commodity chain ethnography is a comparatively recent phenomenon within the discipline of anthropology, an emphasis on how the commodity chain affects social relationships and human labor is also presented. The basics of a cannabis grow cycle and the production process were partly acquired by taking Clover Leaf University's Cannabis Cultivation Certificate Program in Denver, Colorado, in 2014. Fellow students and I took courses on cannabis production strategies that gave technical knowledge on the growth process and cycle. These courses were taught by both modern agricultural experts, as well as previous “criminals” who had operated illegal grows between Europe and the United States. Much of this information is presented in this chapter.

Another source of information for this chapter was gathered from fieldwork on the commodity chain via cannabis tours that take one “behind the scenes” into various indoor grow houses. This gave me the chance to ask questions of the growers and trimmers that cultivate cannabis for retail sale. I also had the opportunity to tour a testing facility in the fall of 2019, which gave me a behind-the-scenes look at how materials were tested, and the difficulties of testing a federally illegal product with little scientific background. Since I participated in three separate cannabis tours, I had the ability to tour multiple grow facilities and ask detailed questions to those who were working within these facilities. Some grow
facilities were on the same campus as the dispensaries that sold the product, other grow facilities were carefully tucked out of the public site. I also was put in a position to have a formal sit-down interviewer with the head of agricultural production of a major cannabis dispensary. Though they did not give permission to be formally quoted in this ethnography, they did allow me to use some of the general knowledge gleaned from our conversations. Lastly, this section also presents the knowledge acquired from small-scale legal home grows that I conducted between the years 2017-2020. Since most budtenders, including myself, choose to have some sort of home-grow setup, the exchanging of information and hands-on learning between professionals working in the cannabis industry were pertinent in the development of learning about the cannabis commodity chain.

**In the Beginning: Vertical Integration**

The marijuana industry in Colorado was founded on a different structural form than other legal economies, implementing a private market system regulated by the state. Colorado used a strict regulatory system that operated in the first years of cannabis legalization termed the “70/30 Vertical Integration System,” meaning that dispensaries had to grow at least 70 percent of what they sold, and 30 percent could come from outside sources of production, thus limiting the supply chain to one owner (Amendment 64 2012). The original reason for vertical integration was to deter fragmentations of ownership and create a “common enterprise under common ownership” (Sullum 2013; MJBizDaily 2014). Vertical integration did seem to fulfill its regulatory tactic as the industry had kept businesses relatively small, with famous dispensaries such as LivWell, Strainwise, and The Clinic, only controlling less than 7 percent of the total market.

Vertical integration also inherently entails the “seed to sale” tracking system that requires private dispensary firms to track the plants via a state-run computer software system by attaching bar codes to each plant throughout the process of growth to prevent “diversion” and theft from the legal to the illegal economy (METRC n.d.). Vertical integration officially expired one year after recreational cannabis was legalized in the fall of 2014, making the vertical integration system an option for producers but not a state
requirement. Many point to vertical integration as the cause for monopolistic capitalist systems, allowing firms to grow too large and have too much control over production (Sullum 2013). This creates an ever-growing power trajectory that expands and segments with increased production of cannabis.

**Overview of Cannabis Commodity Chain in Colorado**

Cannabis is produced in a variety of ways in Colorado. Some of the cannabis is grown outdoors, but the majority is grown in specialized greenhouses. Cannabis can also be grown in a variety of mediums, from hydroponic cannabis, which is grown without the use of soil, to a variety of soil-grown cannabis, which may or may not include organically grown practices. Once the plant poke’s its head out of the medium, it becomes tagged as either a medical cannabis plant or a recreational cannabis plant. The distinction between these two markets essentially happens at the “birth” of the cannabis plant and will follow it through its life cycle. Two identically similar genetic plants will be designated for different consumers once the seed has sprouted and has nothing to do with the genetics of the plant itself. The tagging process relates to differing restrictions and testing components that are required for the separate markets.

Once the plant is tagged, it will go through its growth process, requiring lots of light and nutrients to grow to its mature size. Many first-time growers make the common mistake of not checking on the sex of the plant throughout its grow cycle. Cannabis plants can present either sex, as well as hermaphrodite versions. It only takes one male cannabis plant to pollinate an entire grow house, ruining the season's crop. One informant told me a personal story about how he was hired to help start a grow facility, with the owner putting in over $100,000 in startup costs. After the grow was official up and running, he came back after a few months to discover that no one had checked the plants themselves, and over half of them were male plants, leading to an entire season’s loss. These are common horror stories in the production process and also highlight the risks involved in producing an agricultural plant that many know very little about botanically. Then the flower is forced to “flower,” cutting down its time underneath the lights to
artificially signal autumn. At this point, the plant creates large flower buds on each stem, called a cola, and will produce resin and sacs that will eventually become “flower” inside a dispensary.

Once the plant has reached its mature flowering stage, it will be cut down in the grow house and separated according to its medical/recreational distinction, its strain, and, sometimes, potency. At this point, cannabis cannot be consumed. It will still need to be properly dried in order to be consumable, and the drying process can greatly affect the cannabis “profile” for consumers. This drying process accounts for an entire industry of cannabis sommeliers, as the drying process is similarly equated to the fermentation process of wine. Time, humidity, and drying canister can all affect the overall smell and quality of cannabis flowers. Drying leads the cannabis colas to be transferred from the grow house to large drying racks in a separate space, or sometimes the colas are hung up vertically to dry. While speaking with a cannabis testing facility, they noted that many make the mistake of hanging cannabis in drying rooms that are inadequate for the space, causing mold and other contaminants to invade the product. She noted that a lack of sufficient airflow and carpeting in the dry room are two of the most common mistakes that lead to adulterated cannabis. In addition, since Colorado has a dry climate, the cannabis plant often dries too quickly, and thus additional humidity checks may be required to ensure the proper amount of liquid being evaporated in incremental time periods. But it’s not done yet! At this point, the cannabis will have an overwhelming smell of “grass,” or plant material smell, not the common pungent smell of cannabis. This smell potency is created during the “curing process,” which can take anywhere from 2-6 months to properly acquire. At this point, the flower will be separated from the rest of the cannabis plant. The flower will go onto the curing process, while the rest of the plant material will still be stored for later. In many cases, cannabis coming into dispensaries is not adequately dried or cured.

While working in the medical cannabis industry, budtenders would often open large bags of cannabis and smell them to determine which strains were “good” and which were “bad.” Unappetizing smells were often described as “grass” or “hay” in smell and were quickly discarded as an inferior product by the budtenders. Bags that came in with pungent smells, both appetizing and not, were then put through the
tasting process to see which were more favorable. In many ways, the smell of cannabis is the first indicator of good or bad products in relation to production.

Curing is one of the essential steps of the process of turning a common plant into a sellable commodity as it converts and preserves the compounds, flavors, and nutrients within the flower. Curing is done by putting cannabis products into glass jars that are then “burped” for several weeks (6-12) by opening the top of the jar to allow the drying process to continue until the top is once again closed. This slow curing in the glass leads the cannabis to have improved flavor, enhanced potency, and smoother taste. Budtenders and home grow aficionados take great care in the burping and storage of their cannabis strains. One informant noted it was his favorite part of the day to burp his jars and follow the change of smell and allowed him to control the quality of his cannabis. In the dispensary setting, keeping cannabis in glass jars is supposed to mimic the burping of cannabis to improve flavor, but in reality, the product moves so quickly that jars are refilled daily, if not multiple times a day, leading to inferior product due to industry pressure of getting product on the shelves. Burping, drying, and proper storage of cannabis are also ignored since glass is too expensive to be used as packaging. Cannabis is strictly packaged in plastic in all phases of production, even though plastic is known to be a sub-standard and degrading packaging medium. Many consumers as well noted that they kept their cannabis in the plastic medicine jars that they came in rather than glass. This also accounts for poor quality standards and gives niche markets like small-batch cannabis grows an opportunity to capitalize on these processes, like improved curing, burping, and packaging standards. To compare to alcohol, it is the difference between boxed wine and bottled. Once the cannabis has been properly cured, it goes off to get tested by a cannabis lab. The lab will test for a variety of components, but the main ones that will be marketed are the THC and CBD values within the plant. After testing, it is packed and sent to a designated dispensary to be sold as medical or recreational cannabis.
Unadulterated Products Leaving the Grow: Smoke it

Dried cannabis flowers are often what is referred to under the heading “marijuana” in the United States, but from within the industry, dried cannabis flowers refer to as a specific product called “flower.” Products are often marketed similar to coffee, tea, and wine, where the smell, look, structure, and taste of the product are all judged for quality. The flower is normally kept in curing glass jars on dispensary shelves and are labeled with the strains personality name which many indicate its strengths or value: Girl Scout Cookies, Cat Piss, Green Crack, Blue Dream, and Afghani Bullrider are all creative branding names that have been attached to cannabis flowers (Backes 2014). For many in the industry, not knowing the term “flower” puts one in a position of not knowing even the most basic terminology of the cannabis industry. Smoking flower cannabis results in a quick intake of CBD and THC and therefore is one of the most popular modes of consumption. Smoking flower runs the risk of inhaling aromatic hydrocarbons and toxins, though research shows there has been no increased risk of lung cancer in a variety of medical trials (Barcott 2015, 143). Vaping is heralded as a cleaner form of smoking cannabis flower (and concentrates) as vaporizers increase the temperature of cannabis to 180-250o F. to decarboxylase (activate the psychoactive components with heat) THC from the plant material without the flower combusting. This allows the consumer to capture the THC and other cannabinoids without the toxic byproducts that result from lighting organic material on fire (Barcott 2015, 143). While speaking with medical customers in the dispensary, informants noted that there is an inherent tradeoff in vaporizing cannabis flower; on the one hand, you are ridding the product from its carcinogens leading to a healthier smoke, while on the other hand, you are stripping the flower of all the terpenes and the entourage effect that makes cannabis flower so highly valued. As one consumer put it, “I enjoy both high as they are different, I like to vape which gets me high to focus, but I feel they leave out the sleepy stoney effect, then when I use an old fashion Zig Zag and combust it, it is more intense, I don’t know, I think that in vaping something vital is removed.” For many, however, this is an easy cost-benefit scenario as medical patients may already be dealing with forms of cancer and put health above taste. Other patients who are more health-conscious and are looking
for the “healthiest” way to consume may also prefer to vaporize flower. For recreational consumers, it often comes down to taste and experience, which is why many prefer to smoke whole flower.

**Nugs (Nugget) & Buds (Flower Buds)**

“Nugs” is the informal term for cannabis flowers, and are often judged on their size, structure, and smell. Some consumers enjoy getting the largest nugs to show off to friends, while others prefer smaller nugs. The term “Nug” is one of the few cannabis vocabulary terms that has survived the rebranding of the commodity into the recreational market despite its lack of scientific terminology. The big nug/small nug tradeoff in the dispensary will hit your wallet as larger nugs have larger stems, which are the heaviest part of the plant, leaving many to question whether they are paying for the smokable flower or just the weight of the stem itself. This is the cost-benefit analysis of choosing Nugs; One can choose the largest for cultural capital but pay more for a less smokable product, or one can choose to get small or moderate size buds that are less impressive but give more product per weight. As Alida the budtender put it, “the larger the nug, the smaller the penis,” which she equated to the fast car stereotype (small penis syndrome) of “overcompensation” that consumers need to have highly valued product at the unnecessary expense of spending money. Nug choosing, once the standard, is now only available for a free-weighed product from cannabis jars and has become a boutique experience compared to recreational markets who pre-package their cannabis in specified weights.

**Shake**

“Shake” is technically the small pieces and crumbs left at the bottom of glass jars and takes its name from “shaking” the bottom of the jar once it's empty. Shake is thought of as a less than superior product because it does not contain full cannabis flowers and is often not strain specific. Shake has also taken on a variety of meanings since the legalization of recreational cannabis. In its pure form, shake is created in the dispensary when a jar of cannabis is sold out, and the crumbs are left in the bottom. These crumbs (often highly prized resin crystals) are then shaken into a larger jar that often sits away from the
rest of the cannabis strains. This will become the Shake Jar and will sit in a corner or on a top shelf until it is full. This results in a combination of small pieces of various cannabis strains and, depending on sales, has often has been sitting around the shop for a long time, thus depleting the freshness and potency. Shake is often sold at discounted rates and is bought by consumers for many reasons: 1. it’s cheaper than strain-specific cannabis and includes a variety of strains; 2. it forms the base for making any type of edible, and 3.) it also forms the base of blasting concentrates. Shake has become such a highly prized commodity due to its perception as a good deal at a good cost that dispensaries have been re-branding and re-categorizing non-flower parts of the cannabis plant as shake. To cut costs, some larger corporate dispensaries will market their trim byproduct as “House Shake” without the consumer knowing. Since consumers are not allowed to see the process of making shake, and many corporate budtenders are removed from the creation of shake, the ignorance of what is actually shake and what is trim has become purposefully confused.

**Trim**

What happened to the rest of the plant that was not cured as flower? This product turns from a cannabis plant to its own form of commodification as “trim” anything that is trimmed off of the plant that is not flower. This trim, which has very low levels of THC, can be made into various other commodities such as concentrated products and edibles that enhance the small amount present. In the early medical market, extractions were also made out of the trim-only product. While working at a medical dispensary before recreation had opened up there were two types of cannabis concentrate categories, those made from whole bud (WB), which was pricier, and those made from trim (T) for the budget consumer. This distinction no longer exists in the current market as vertical integration has allowed wholesale trim to be bought and sold between companies. Most cannabis concentrates are now made from only byproducts of the cannabis plant that cannot be sold as flower. Businesses are constantly looking for new and improved ways of turning cannabis trim and stems into commodified products - this will be an interesting sector to continue to monitor when federal legality occurs, as these products could be turned into usable products.
such as clothes, paper, and construction materials. As mentioned above, shake and trim are often confused, though their quality is markedly different (in other words, shake trumps trim).

**Popcorn**

“Popcorn” is a relatively newly commodified term to indicate the size of specific buds. Some dispensaries will market pre-packed popcorn ounces for a discounted price. Popcorn buds sit above shake and trim but below buds in terms of consumer value. While doing participant observation at a recreational dispensary, the majority of calls entering into the dispensary were asking about if the store “had any of that popcorn” or “where’s the popcorn at?” One customer noted, “that last batch of lazy popcorn buds smelled like straw, got me high though and only cost $30 and eight.” Another rationalization from consumers to buy popcorn buds came from Clara, who noted, “ya grind it all up anyway, what’s the difference?” Popcorn, which used to be included more often than not in shake jars, are now seen as budget-friendly nugs; they do not carry the cultural capital of a nug but maintain the same quality of the composition. Other cannabis markets have termed popcorn buds with different identifiers. I have heard popcorn buds in Oregon be called “B-buds” to indicate a b-grade in quality and also have heard customers from California refer to them as “budlets” or “mini-buds.”

**Extraction, Concentrates, and Dabbing: Smash It**

Extraction facilities are an offshoot of the production chain where invaluable cannabis product is taken and created into highly valued cannabis concentrates. These businesses were once tied to vertical integration, and thus, were not widely spread due to the high startup cost and knowledge barrier. Without vertical integration, these facilities can operate without the added risk and costs of either a grow house or a dispensary leading to lower production costs and higher profits than many “canna-businesses.”

Methods of extraction are numerous and continue to evolve quickly. New cannabis products have been hitting the shelves precisely due to new production methods that are being invented. In the early years of the legalization of cannabis, concentrates were new to the market and hard to come by. After five
years, cannabis concentrates have become a popular method of consumption, often rivaling flower altogether (Lhooq 2019). Concentrates are often termed for their color or structure—shatter, budder, flan, sauce, wax, and oil are all names of concentrates that indicate their respective forms. Concentrates are also created with a variety of techniques, with some products being freeze-dried, while others are heated to high temperatures.

Cannabis concentrates may often be referred to by the types of solvents used in the extraction process, leading to different preferences among consumers. Solventless products include concentrates like hashish, which is a form of concentrated cannabis product made from the resinous trichomes (kief) from plant material that is sieved or shaken off of the flowers of cannabis plants. Hashish takes its name from the Arabic word for dry herbage, and this also points to the way hashish is produced (Booth 2015). Once the trichomes have been separated from the other plant material, the remaining kief is secured in a heat-resistant bag or material that can be heated and compressed. The final product resembles a puck or a brick and ranges from light green to dark brown in color. Hashish is often pliable and can then be cut into malleable pieces and smoked. The resulting hashish mixture can contain and exceed 40 percent THC (Caulkins et al. 2016, 9).

Kief is also used in combination with other forms of cannabis to create high-end elite products. Joints that are rolled in gooey concentrates and then rolled in kief are sometimes referred to as “cannagars” (cannabis cigars). Buds that are soaked in concentrates like hash oil and then rolled in kief are sometimes referred to as “Moon Rocks” or “Caviar.” These products are often reserved for “high-end” customers looking to spend large amounts of money on elite products that combine various forms of cannabis commodities.

Solvent extraction products were some of the first concentrates created for the medical market. Hash oil, not to be confused with hashish, is a chemical extract of the cannabis plant that is often under the umbrella of the term solvent “concentrates.” The production process is extremely dangerous as plant material is funneled into a glass tube and “blasted” with butane or propane to create different forms of concentrated oil products (Caulkins et al. 2016, 10). Often this process results in real “blasts” that can
burn and injure whoever is handling the process. This has led Colorado hospitals to see a significant increase in burn victims relating to hash oil explosions in private residences, described by residents as “the new meth houses” (Hahn 2017).

Blasting has its advantages to producers and distributors as the entire plant, not just the flowers, can be used in the process and is often sold in varying levels of quality. For example, a “whole plant concentrate” will include the leaves, flowers, and stems for the highest quality and higher-priced (most concentrated THC) product, whereas trim concentrates will only include material from the leaves and stems. Once blasted, the resulting product can come in different forms of consistency such as wax, budder (think butter), or shatter (similar to a thin sheet of glass).

During the initial phases of legalization, micro-communities began to crop up in the Denver area that were experimenting with different blasting methods. One of these groups was referred to as the “backdoor blasters,” named after the backdoor allies where they would heat and blast product together outside. Due to the combustible nature of blasting, the Backdoor Blasters would gather and pool their industry knowledge together to help each other and also help to decrease dangerous accidents from occurring. With the end of vertical integration, the Backdoor Blasters were hired into commodity chains as informants for investors who were more willing to pour money into facilities knowing they did not have to also grow and sell the product.

Newly produced concentrated commodities, such as “live resin,” have been made by experimenting with freshly frozen cannabis as opposed to dried cannabis. These products have been hitting the market as production technologies are constantly evolving (Bennet 2017). Hash oil and resins carry solvent impurities that can lead to the consumption of toxic solvents if the product is not heated to the correct temperature. New concentrated products are being created daily, with new items like “moon rocks,” “caviar,” and “diamonds” becoming available for purchase for high-end consumers.

“Dabbing” is the verb used to describe the inhaling of superheated cannabis concentrations in the form of vapor inhalation. Concentrated products have higher vaporization temperate than cannabis flower, and thus different paraphernalia is needed to consume these types of products. The process of dabbing
involves heating a metallic surface with a blow torch to roughly 3140 F. degrees (the temperature at which THC is volatilized) and then putting a “dab” or small quantity of concentrate on the surface with a tool so that it evaporates into the “dab rig” (modified water pipe/bong) (Leafly 2017).

At one work party gathering, budtenders were invited to a private residence to have a “dab sesh.” Instead of coming to the party with a pocket full of cannabis and papers, as one would do in the “old days,” the budtenders ascended on the residence with bags full of cannabis paraphernalia. It seemed that not all of the budtenders could even be in the same room as they all needed outlets to plug in their dab rigs to create “stations.” It was eventually decided between the budtenders that they should choose the two “best” dab rigs that were brought to the party, and everyone would be allowed to use those two rigs. Though this was accepted among the party-goers, the owners of the rigs were hesitant to allow so many people to use their stations and hovered closely next to their rigs to make sure they weren’t being mishandled.

According to Rachel Chambers at Leafly.com, dabbing is somewhat of a controversial issue within the cannabis community for two reasons: It increases user levels of THC and gives them large quantities of THC at one time, and the image it produces resembles that of other illicit drugs like methamphetamines and crack-cocaine, having some users compare it as the “crack” of pot (Chambers 2017). The author herself had a bad personal experience with dabbing when the process left her with blown blood vessels in her eye after a dab session with fellow budtenders. Unfortunately, for users who have increased their THC tolerance to a high enough level, dabbing may be the only consumption practice that may offer the benefits of THC.

From feedback from consumers, companies know that the blow torch is a nonstarter for many consumers. The use of glass and blowtorches are incredibly unfamiliar to the “everyday” consumer and create a barrier for concentrate consumption which is often a dispensary's highest-priced item. The startup costs to dabbing are also high, a dab rig, concentrates, and a torch will total hundreds of dollars in start-up costs. Knowledge of how to dab is also hard to come by, and word of mouth or finding a friend to teach you is still the most common way consumers learn how to consume concentrates; consumers need to be
familiar with items such as atomizer chambers, female and male fittings, and temperature settings for vape rigs. This has led the industry to try and create more palatable consumption methods, such as concentrate pens, that are more user-friendly and don’t carry negative drug stereotypes. However, dabbing has been especially popular among younger consumers, who enjoy the anti-society nature of the product and its consumption. The inhalation of concentrated products with solvents can lead to “significant amounts of toxic degradation products” (Meehan-Atrash, Luo, and Strongin 2017). The advent of highly concentrated cannabis products has been at the forefront of medical warnings and has gained considerable regulatory traction in Colorado. In addition, “vape lung” has also entered the lexicon of cannabis consumers, as many are worried about the negative consequences that solvents can have on human lung tissue. As of 2020, Colorado has banned any additives into vaporizer cartridges as over 2,000 cases of pulmonary illnesses have been linked to vaping. Four of these cases have led to death.

**Edible Consumption Practices: Eat It**

“Edibles” is a catch-all term for any cannabis product that is consumed via ingestion. Edible categories include infused beverages (soda, beer, coffee, tea), food products (infused pizzas, pasta, and traditional food items), desserts (candies, sweets, brownies), and non-food forms (pills, capsules, tabs, mix in powders). Edibles include varying amounts of cannabinoids and percentages but often range from 5mg THC doses to 100mg doses per product on the recreational side, to 10mg-1000mg THC doses on the medical side in Colorado. Edibles can be made with the raw organic plant material that is infused into a fatty acid such as butter or oil and then added to food. Concentrated forms of hash oil, hashish, or powdered concretes can also be directly sprayed or added onto foodstuffs. The advent of powdered cannabis edibles has added new regulatory concerns, as powdered THC can now be easily camouflaged into almost any food and non-food item on the market (use your imagination); powdered cannabis is often tasteless, odorless, and incredibly ambiguous.
Sublingual application of cannabis is thought to be the “next frontier in biosciences” (Dresser 2018). Sublingual administration of cannabis leads to a biphasic uptake, meaning it can enter the bloodstream via tissue under the tongue, thus avoiding digestion, and is directly delivered to the brain. This mimics the positive effects of smoking (quick uptake) without the negative health consequences of inhaling smoke. Its delivery can also be more carefully controlled, as you do not need to account for various metabolic differences among people’s varying genetic bodies. Furthermore, sublingual applications via tinctures do not need to contain other nutrients like sugars or fats and can be one of the most discreet consumption practices on the market. Sublingual products are sold on both medical and recreational sides of the market and include dissolvable strips, tinctures, sprays, lozenges, tabs, and gum. “Micro dosing” is a pretty self-descriptive term meaning consuming very small amounts of cannabis, usually so small you cannot feel any psychoactive effects. Micro dosing has also become a popular consumption method for other illegal narcotics, such as LSD and psychosillibins (NCSBN 2018).

“Topicals” is the last category of non-inhaled cannabis products being produced for the dispensary market. Topicals are any cannabinoid product that is absorbed into your body through the dermal and subdermal layers of skin; this includes any area of your outside skin, as well as bodily cavities. Dermal products include dermal patches, lotions, sexual lubrication, bath bombs, and assorted creams that are applied topically to the skin. These products come in a variety of THC to CBD ratios and THC percentages and are often marketed according to these ratios. The nature of the product determines its use and can be used for a range of experiences and medical ailments. Most commonly, they are used to decrease inflammation, ease pain in muscles and joints, help combat skin issues like psoriasis, and for enjoyment. Dermal products usually do not get the patient/consumer “high” in the traditional sense and have become popular products for those avoiding psychoactive properties of cannabis or consumption practices (people with diabetes or medical ailments). The topical category also incorporates unorthodox methods of consumption such as suppositories and injections, which according to physicians, have “not been studied in a clinical setting” as of yet (Grotenhermen 2003).
The effects and “high” of edibles are significantly different from other uptake methods. When cannabis is attached to fatty amino acid chains, it can be absorbed into the bloodstream differently according to its fat of choice. Many at-home edible makers swear by coconut oil as it has the longest fatty acid chain and thus a more stable uptake. The inconsistent absorption of cannabis into the bloodstream is due to the fact that cannabinoids are hydrophobic (“water-hating”) and need other molecules to be absorbed properly (Grotenhermen 2003). The delayed effect is often what gets most people into trouble with edibles. Edibles can be felt anywhere from 30 minutes to three hours after being consumed. They are seen as a healthier alternative to smoking but also come with a majority of the negative consequences and dangers seen in the media. First-time consumers often consume the recommended dose (5mg) and end up not feeling anything, leaving them to consume much more. Once the effects hit, it is already too late, and they are forced to ride out the high. The effects of overconsumption of edibles are often severe lethargy, and consumers end up “sleeping it off” until their bodies resume normal function.

Overdosing on edibles has been one of the most spoken about aspects of cannabis consumption in modern times and has also become one of Colorado’s longest-running industry jokes. The “Maureen Dowd Effect” or “over-Dowding” refers to the New York Times writer who traveled to Colorado in 2014 to write a story on the cannabis industry (Barcott 2015, 271). After purchasing high-dose edibles, she naively consumed an overdose amount. This led her to write a lengthy article describing her eight-hour bad reaction where at one point, she convinced herself she had died and was paranoid that no one was telling her (Dowd 2014). Her paranoid reaction led her consequently to lay blame on the industry and potency of products rather than herself as the consumer. Dowd seemingly ignored the industry's guidelines on edibles and edible consumption practices of taking low doses and waiting two hours between dosage (Dowd 2014; Hudak 2016, 17).

Not all edible overdoses are as numerous as the Dowd case. The dangers of edibles are publicized as one of the great pushes against legalization. For example, Richard Kirk ended up shooting his wife of 15 years after eating a high-dose cannabis edible. Also, young student Levy Thamba also consumed six times the recommended edible dose while on vacation in Colorado and ended up walking over the hotel
railing to his death on the floor below (Barcott 2015, 228-229). These specific cases are often up for debate in the cannabis community as in neither case the edible was the cause of death, but perhaps a precursor or catalyst for other underlying mental and physical conditions.

Testing Facility: Test It

Testing facilities started to become established in the late 2000s in Colorado with testing companies opening up second locations or migrating from California. Dispensary and grow houses were looking for ways to standardize products, as growing strain-specific batches of cannabis inevitably created great fluctuation within batches. Growers started to notice that one batch may have been testing at 25 percent THC with the next at 14 percent. Testing adds immense value to the cannabis product as levels of THC and CBD are integral in price levels. Often, dispensaries will have “house strains,” ones that they will continually grow (in their own grow houses from earlier vertical integration rules), and always have on the shelf, ranging from 14 to 23 percent depending on what it is “testing at” for THC. Consumers that only shop at one dispensary may even call in to ask what the product is “testing at” to gauge how willing they are to buy it. Having the products tested adds to the dispensary's overall costs as each strain is required to be tested at $100 per test. This factors into a grow house’s financial budgets, and smaller-scale grow operation may opt for fewer strains due to cost. Concentrates were not tested in Colorado until 2019 and requires all concentrate facilities to test for mycotoxins, while flower strains are tested for mycotoxins, heavy metals, and pesticides.

The testing industry will continue to grow as industry experts uncover more about cannabis and harmful products it is being extracted with. For example, as of January 1, 2020, cadmium, arsenic, and nickel will be tested for on any product heading to market. These compounds have been proven harmful if combusted and inhaled. Kati Schebeler, a former marijuana enforcement compliance investigator, illuminated the various issues with the testing (Otañez 2019). Meeting with local budtenders and occupational safety and health administration experts, she warned of the various health and safety problems that face the industry. She warned of a lack of regulations and safety oversight, even showing
emails sent to higher levels of government about her concerns. Schebeler blamed the lack of federal oversight for not providing sufficient guidance to testing facilities, as dispensaries continue to sell a product that may contain harmful levels of pesticides, mold, and harmful bacteria (Otañez 2019).

It is not required for dispensaries to post THC and CBD testing values, and many still don’t do it. For the recreational industry, testing is common practice as it creates pricing structures and measurement values products. The higher the testing values, the more valuable or “top shelf” the cannabis is marketed. During interviews, budtenders often admitted to adulterating testing values on the shelf to increase or decrease demand for products. For example, one plant of Blue Dream cannabis may test at 14 percent, while another plant in the same batch may test at 22 percent. Dispensaries may then choose to market the Blue Dream at 22 percent despite its real range of 14-22 percent. Another example is that a dispensary may have too much or too little inventory and will change the percentage based on supply and demand. Again, if Blue Dream is testing between 14-22 percent, but there is too much of the product, they may market it as 22 percent to increase sales, or if they don’t have much product, they may stifle sales to keep it on the shelf and market it as 14 percent. Employees have had little confidence in these measures and felt that “They don’t even care, they just do some random test, they just do what they do,” said Amanda, a budtender. Testing remains one of the biggest differences in knowledge between consumers and employees. Since employees create, maintain, and regulate the value of the products, they also have an inside perspective of which products are actually of more value than others rather than what is marketed as value.

Conclusion

This chapter focuses on how cannabis is grown, regulated, transformed, and supplied up until the point of sale. This chapter also presents an ethnographic portrait of how various forms of cannabis are produced and conceived of by producers, consumers, and workers in the Colorado cannabis industry. Different consumption practices are important to highlight as they dictate how the raw cannabis plant is further processed after leaving the grow, thus adding possible contaminants and safety issues in a
sequential process. This chapter also focused on the properties of cannabis that make the product into a commodity, with differing levels of molecular compounds, shapes, and sizes. These are foundational knowledge needed to fully understand how a simple agricultural “weed” that grows naturally, is tagged and categorized as soon as it sprouts its first leaves. The plants are separated at “birth” into markets of consumption; either the plant will be used recreationally or medically.

Once the plants have fully matured, they are processed and tested for levels of cannabinoids that will later be marketed within a dispensary. Any part of the cannabis plant that is not directly sold as flower to consumers is re-purposed into other products like concentrated forms of cannabis and edible products. Cannabis products are intelligently advertised to account for supply and demand in the current market and within the dispensary itself. Advertising and marketing are left to the dispensary and are not strictly regulated by the state, allowing dispensaries to be “flexible” with their marketing practices. Consumption of cannabis products is based on consumer taste, financial constraints, and health considerations. As the market continues to grow, new products and techniques are emerging to differentiate brands and dispensaries and to satisfy consumer demands. The next chapter will expound on the differences between medical and recreational dispensaries that sell these products within their stores in terms of consumers, sales, and products, and will also contribute a theory of phases of il/legalization that illustrate how recreational sales came to dominate and overtake medical sales in Colorado.
CHAPTER FIVE:
THE DISPENSARY: PHASES OF ILLEGALIZATION

This chapter's analysis on dispensary phases was directly derived from ethnographic fieldwork; specifically, the two positions I held pre and post cannabis recreational legalization, in conjunction with participant observation on weekly dispensary visits from 2014-2020. This chapter analyzes the change in dispensary structure under a regulated commodity chain as opposed to free-market capitalism found in the recreational market and how these changes in economic structure affect the landscape and marketing of cannabis dispensaries. This analysis can also be derived from participant observation within the field site of Denver, Colorado, taken over a period of years to fully understand how time has changed the physical and symbolic relationships within a dispensary. It seeks to address the research question of what is the nature of the Colorado cannabis market system? and sheds light on the fact that there are in fact, two market systems in tandem with one another.

Colorado currently has two different cannabis markets operating at the same time, the medical marijuana market and the recreational cannabis market. Though they both sell the same cannabis, the type of dispensary, procedures, and oversight create dramatically different experiences for the consumer. Even though there are generally two sides to consumption that are structurally different, products are made from the same cannabis flowers, and there is no difference between the actual THC levels within the cannabis plant itself. For the consumer, the difference between the two markets lies in the number of THC milligrams a consumer can purchase at the point of sale; medical patients can purchase larger quantities of flower (over 2 ounces) than recreational consumers (up to 1 ounce). For the producer, the seed-to-sale tracking system creates a bifurcation of cannabis plants at birth. For the testing facilities, these two products meet different standards for consumption based on their use-value. The political economy of
il/legal cannabis may start with the production process, but distribution, exchange, the market, and consumption are equally critical in the understanding of an ethnography of distribution and exchange under cannabis capitalism.

The dispensary is a place of sale of food and consumable products but is not a restaurant. It is a site of medicine, but it is not a pharmacy. It sells retail clothes and paraphernalia, but it’s not in a shopping mall. You are encouraged to evaluate agricultural products, but you cannot taste them. For this reason, the dispensary is unlike other markets in the previous history, and Colorado only presents one case of how dispensaries are created and regulated under capitalism.

**Barriers to Medical Cannabis**

Doctors are involved in a strict “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy in illegal markets regarding the medicinal use of cannabis to treat medical ailments. Some crossed that boundary by advising their patients to find cannabis, especially those patients with chronic or terminal illnesses, causing them to be at great risk legally from prescribing illegal medicines. The prescription of illegal or unregulated medicines causes various structural problems. One problematic component is technological. There is simply no insurance code for high CBD cannabis in their computer programs. This creates an issue as there is no international classification disease code (ICD) for insurance companies to compile patient histories. If doctors do end up putting marijuana into the system as some type of code, hospitals and doctors are put at risk of being subject to scrutiny from the DEA and other federal agencies that can jeopardize a doctor’s license, and even institutional licenses (Barcott 2015, 263).

This did not hinder doctors in Colorado Springs from treating medical migrants with cannabis. Hospitals in Colorado Springs have been conducting studies on cannabis and Dravert Syndrome, a form of pediatric epilepsy (Barcott 2015). By administering low THC, high CBD cannabis strains, many children have found relief from epileptic seizures from the Colorado cannabis strain “Charlotte’s Web,” whose name was taken from the popular children's novel. This genetic strain was created by a family of cannabis producers who grew high CBD strains and gained massive traction and brand awareness among
medical patients. High CBD strains were once hard to find, even on the medical market. A medical dispensary would be lucky to have one high testing CBD strain and would often designate that one strain as such. Since then, high CBD strains have been used to crossbreed other high CBD strains to meet market demand in both medical and recreational markets (Barcott 2015, 261).

In the past, medical doctors have been targeted by the state as distributors of illegal narcotics, such as cannabis, due to the connections described above (Caulkins et al. 2016). In terms of recommending cannabis and providing recommendations for medical cards for patients, few doctors have been willing to risk their hard-earned reputations in their respective fields to provide medical marijuana cards. Fear of losing their medical license and being taken to court are also large risks that many find unnecessary. One physician interviewed for this study said: “Why would I risk my reputation and business just so kids can get high? It’s not a smart career move.” For one, doctors looking to prescribe cannabis are required to register with the state, and thus many are reluctant to join the official state list. This has led to a few doctors taking over the market pre-recreational sales as less than 20 Colorado physicians had given over 100,000 medical registrations, earning them the reputation of “Kush docs” (Kush is a cannabis strain) or “4/20 docs” (4/20 is April 20th, international cannabis day) (Caulkins et al. 2016, 209). The state has followed these trends and has slowly opened new avenues of cannabis recommendations from the medical field. As of 2020, Colorado has allowed healthcare professionals to prescribe cannabis, including dentists and nurses. The reasons for prescribing cannabis have also changed, with cannabis being recommended as treatments for autism and Opioid addiction (Mitchel 2020).

The Red Card

Red cards, or medical marijuana patient identification cards, were the first form of identification for medical cannabis users in Colorado. The first issued medical cannabis cards were a long strip of construction paper with a red banner around it, similar to a very skinny certificate, with the patient’s information on the card. These cards were obtained via the state after receiving a medical evaluation from a doctor and were colloquially termed “red cards,” a name that stuck after the subsequent changing of size
and coloration. One of the biggest complaints about these early red card forms was that they were large and thus had to be folded many times to fit into someone’s wallet or purse, leaving issues with the ink rubbing off at the fold marks and subsequent tears of paper. These cards were not allowed to be tampered with, meaning the user could not laminate them for long-term use.

The next card to come into existence improved the original form in size, as it shrunk down to the size of a credit card and was certainly a step up from the clumsy red card. Version 2.0 also included a thicker paper with a laminate sheen and purple mountains in the background. Patients quickly complained to the state that the printed words/ink would easily stick to other forms of plastic and come off altogether, especially in wallets where there is a clear plastic protector, which was sure to stick to the inked letters. Also, once your card was lost, the process was long and arduous, and you would have to wait by mail to get a replacement.

Currently, the “red card” is no longer red, nor purple, nor even a card. The evolution of the cannabis medical card has found its way to its current form, an Adobe PDF file with enhanced technologies built-in. Budtenders are taught the rules of how to read a card. It has to be in original PDF form and opened in Adobe on a smartphone or printed out. The mountains and flowers in the background need to remain visible to be used in cases of degradation to paper copies. And all information needs to match the patient’s license.

**Early Boutique Medical Dispensary**

As previously discussed, the industry started with medical-only retail venues called “dispensaries” that only could sell cannabis products to those holding a state-sponsored cannabis red card. These purchases were both tracked via the store seed-to-sale vertical integration system, as well as the state tracking system METRC (METRC n.d.). During the legalization of medical cannabis, the term “dispensary” was adopted to describe the space where a patient could go to have their medication dispensed to them. This followed current points of sale for controlled substances such as a pharmacy, with
the outside being non-discreet except for large green crosses that signify that medical cannabis is sold inside.

This pharmacy-like association was seen in early medical dispensaries, as they closely mirrored more of a medical office once inside rather than a point-of-sale retail store. A typical medical dispensary would have a waiting room with chairs and magazines that patients could read while they waited. There might be soft music on or a promotional video being played on a wall tv. The mood was often laid back, with patients calmly waiting, looking at their mobile phones, or browsing the educational materials around the waiting room. They would “check-in” with the receptionist behind a bulletproof glass window that resembled a pharmacy window until they were “called back” to see a “caretaker.” The waiting time accounted for the dispensary to double-check that the patient’s red card, ID, and profile all match and that the patient has not purchased more than their legal limits for that day.

If everything matched, the patient would then be called back to either a single bud room with just them and a budtender or a smaller room with two to three budtenders behind glass counters. Medical dispensaries also often required very few employees, with only four employees needed to run a small dispensary at any one time. These employees would often be trained in all positions and would exchange jobs throughout their shift. Budtenders during this time were a jack of all trades, being both the front desk associate, budtender, and inventory manager all in the same shift. The number of patients within the store was carefully counted and measured, as only one person per salesperson was allowed back in the budroom. The doors to the budrooms were also heavily controlled, with each budroom being locked with either a key or door code.

Once a customer was escorted back into a bud room, they would follow government procedures that dictated their purchasing behaviors. One of the biggest rules during this time was that patients would not be able to use their phones while back in the budroom. Patients were not allowed to text or call anyone while making purchases to cut down on illegal market sales. If a patient was taking an order for a friend over the phone, this would signal an illegal trade and put risk onto the budtenders and dispensaries. This was further enforced due to the security video that was taping all exchanges that occurred within the
budrooms. While interacting with patients, the budtender gave the outward appearance of a quasi-medical professional. Budtenders were giving out specific information on the kinds of cannabis but were also tasked with researching which strain could be used for different ailments the patient presented. Budtenders were also in charge of advising dosing and consumption options depending on the patient’s illness. Cannabis products during the medical phase of legalization changed frequently, and budtenders had to be quick to adapt to new inventory. Brands and companies would be shut down by the state, some products were under- or over-effective, and surviving companies would try and re-brand to meet new research and consumers.

There were many different types of flower choices available. They were all held in glass jars. Nothing at this point was pre-packaged for sale as the production was done on too small of a scale to hire extra packaging employees. Pre-packaging of cannabis was in its early stages (the trade was in ounces only) and was done by budtenders during slow shifts. Dispensaries assumed that patients were looking for flower cannabis as this had been the most widely consumed product before legalization. Many legitimate medical marijuana patients had yet to hear of concentrates. Concentrates were just starting, and medical patients had their pick between concentrated budders, waxes, and then, later, shatter if it could be found. Only a handful of companies were producing these concentrated products to do upfront costs of creating a safe environment for extraction, and the quality was highly variable from box to box, which would lead customers to ask budtenders to open packages to visually show them what the product looked like before purchasing. Concentrates at this time were not tested by the state and wouldn’t be until 2019. Edibles included home-baked food concoctions, such as cookies, brownies, and butters, and were not regulated by the state in terms of food sanitation or safety. The beginning of products such as taffy and gummies were also popular at medical dispensaries would continue to expand into liquid drinks and more variation in products.

Once products were purchased, a prescription label would be printed with the patient’s ID code. For consumers, if at any time the individual’s car was stopped during transport from the store to home, the receipt of the legal cannabis must be present in the car and shown to the officer along with the product
being in a childproof package, often termed an “exit bag.” The packaging of the exit bag, once it left the store, went through a variety of experimental designs. In addition to the child-proof push and turn plastic bottles that held cannabis, dispensaries needed to have another layer of protection from the bag in which the pill canister would be placed. Since the state-required dispensaries to have childproof packaging, many dispensaries saw this as an extra layer of profit and would charge patients $1-3 for specially branded child safety bags. These contraptions were often so difficult to open, and patients would end up cutting through them to find the product, thus needing to purchase another exit bag the following trip. Exit bags were also painfully forgotten at home or in the car and would need to be repurchased. The childproof bags also evolved over the years, some with ties, toggles, and keys, others with multiple layers of zipping mechanism. Some of the more responsible customers were overly careful with exit bags and would collect different brands of them in their cars, not wanting to pay the fee repeatedly. The bags were often touted as symbols of compliance, showing the state that their dispensary has gone above and beyond, trying to out-prove state regulators by being “over-compliant.” The industry was making a large amount of profit, and therefore, producing a bag that they charged patients for allowed them to make more profit from non-cannabis products and showed the state and consumers how “good” (read compliant) they were.

The physical design of dispensaries were highly segmented to control patients’ behavior within the dispensary. Patients would be ushered from one small room to another, constantly being chaperoned by an employee that would have to open and close doors for them. In this way, patients were guided through the dispensary experience. Customers would only see the rooms that employees allowed them to see, and thus the front and back of the dispensary were separated from the experience. Many times, this segmentation would leave customers disoriented with winding hallways calling out, “Is this the way out?” This “guided tour” type of experience for customers was a tactic for being able to control compliance within the dispensary as budtenders would be surveying the customer one-on-one to make sure they were not breaking any rules. This also helped cut down on face-to-face robberies as potential thieves would
need to carry out the act alone and then would immediately be locked into a series of rooms, similar to a maze.

Within medical dispensaries, in the early phases of legalization, the patient held a great deal of purchasing power within the market. The consumer had power through their use of their red card, which signed away their right to grow cannabis within their household in lieu of the dispensary growing it for them as their “caretaker.” Since the dispensaries rely on patient plant counts to increase their production, having a large number of patients equaled a larger amount of cannabis, and thus, a larger margin for profit. It was not unusual to see dispensaries offering up to $300 of free products just for someone to sign over their plant count and become a member of that medical dispensary. Members would often get an upfront discount on the product along with discounts every time after any product was purchased. Members could sign over their plant counts for 60 days, the least number of days to grow an entire cannabis plant from seed to sale. At that point, if a patient no longer liked the dispensary or their products, they would be able to leave that dispensary and sign on with another one with new benefits. This gave patients power in their transactions and kept the dispensary's patient preferences in mind when choosing new products or strains. Medical cardholders thus controlled through purchasing power the cultivation and production of cannabis on a statewide scale.

**Corporate Recreational Retail**

The recreational dispensary experience may, on the surface, seem similar to a medical experience but with more scrutiny. One can see a major shift in how the dispensary identity has changed. In the recreational market, dispensaries can still be small in scale but are more often large retail stores with various locations throughout the Denver metro area. Due to vertical integration (the 70/30 rule), which expired in the fall of 2014, companies could control various licenses within the state and buy more than 30 percent of their inventory from other grow houses.

At the time of writing this dissertation, recreational consumers can find recreational dispensaries via the internet with websites like Weedmaps or Leafly that show products carried, locations, and current
deals that are updated almost hourly. Customers can now also order online and pick up in-store. Once inside, customers need to present the front desk associate with their ID, which will be checked into the Point of Sale (POS) system. In many cases, the bulletproof glass wall has been removed. The role of the front desk associate is to make sure they have legitimate forms of ID, as recreational sales allow out-of-state and out-of-country customers. Sales to these customers are not allowed in the medical market. Front desk associates are encouraged to engage the customer in conversations, explaining what is on sale that week and what new products are available. This person may be the same as, or different from, the security guard that keeps employees safe and makes sure customers are abiding by the rules and are not causing issues for the budtenders. The waiting room that once resembled a doctor’s office has transformed into a holding area of entertainment. Music is often louder than talking volume, posters and TVs line the walls, and other interactive activities hold off time-pressed customers. Some dispensaries may even offer an interactive experience while customers wait to go into the budroom, such as a small glass-blowing studio or a fireplace with chairs. In some cases, the recreational dispensary has scrapped the waiting room altogether in favor of checking IDs at the door and then having customers wait in line inside the budrooms themselves.

Once properly identified and checked in, the recreational customer will head back to the large room where they will be directed to a “bay” or station with a budtender that helps them pick out their desired retail products. The budrooms have changed in appearance from multiple small segregated budrooms with one budtender to one large open concept room with multi-budtenders. This allows all budtenders and all customers to be in one open-air room at the same time. One way they get around issues of theft and security is by not carrying any product within the large rooms. Glass counters and displays are made with fake, unmedicated products. Many times customers do not know that the products are fake versions of the real thing. Customers can choose different strains not from large jars of product displayed on shelves but from one bud or one small piece of the product that is now placed on display counters. Instead of smelling whole jars, this leaves customers sniffing small, single-sized jars.
In recreational dispensaries, most of the product is already pre-weighed and packaged. This leaves no room for small quantities or uneven quantities that patients might be able to purchase in a medical dispensary. It also helps streamline the process for budtenders instead of catering to things like personal preference in bud size or shape. This decision was made to decrease the time and energy spent with individual customers and thus increase profits for the dispensary. Colorado residents and non-residents need to be over the age of 21 to enter a recreational dispensary. Customers can purchase 1 ounce of flower, or 8 grams of concentrates, or 800mg of edibles, or any combination up to those limits. Budtenders’ main focus is to make sure customers do not purchase above their legal amounts.

In these types of large corporate dispensaries, a second layer to the purchase process is added that did not exist in the earlier medical-only market. That is the inventory counter. Once the customer decides on what they want, they may pay for their product there with the budtender or at the next stop in the process with the inventory budtender. This varies among recreational dispensaries. Regardless, once they choose their product, they leave the budtender with nothing but a receipt. The customer then must move to a second line leading to the pickup window, where a customer will show their receipt in exchange for a bag of their products. This way, the budtenders do not physically handle any product at all. They simply help the customer choose from the products, and they are sent off. Customers are often confused with this process as it creates multiple levels of employee interactions, leaving ambiguity in who deserves to be tipped (Post 2019). As the industry is service-based, it is often customary to tip budtenders and other staff members within the dispensary. Some dispensaries have banned the practice altogether, while other dispensaries encourage and expect to be tipped for their service. In these cases, the recreational customer is free to move through the dispensary while employees stay stationary. Within the dispensary, there is always a key badge manager who oversees deliveries, employees, and compliance of the store. If the store is especially large, then a janitor or cleaning service will be provided, though in Colorado, this is rare.

The pickup window usually consists of high-level budtenders who have worked their way up to a new position of inventory specialists. These employees are trusted with bagging, tagging, and organizing the inventory. They also create the shopping bag of products that the consumer has chosen with their
budtender. Inventory budtenders often are the frontlines for what products are “in” or which products will be coming in, what they look like, and so forth. In this case, the common budtender is removed from making their own judgments on the product as they do not get to physically see or touch it. Budtenders then rely on the inventory budtenders for what they think looks or tastes good. After picking up their products, customers are free to leave the dispensary. Exit bags no longer exist in medical or recreational markets; medical containers are now considered an appropriate level of child safety, and simple ambiguous brown lunch bags with stabled receipts are the most widely used form of product packaging.

**Distribution Drops**

Recreational sales have newly created ways to convey product scarcity in the marketplace. To increase attraction and attention to premium commodities, dispensaries will do what they call product “drops,” which is coded language for getting new inventory from the grow house or craft brand market. Drops are heavily advertised both within the shop directly to customers, to loyalty program consumers by telephone, and on websites. As soon as it has been “dropped,” the product is immediately put on the shelves, and some products sell out within hours. A typical drop advertisement will convey a sense of the high-quality product in limited quantities for a short period. Words like “first come, first served,” “limited quantities available,” and “we recommend getting here early to secure your bag” point to a sense of urgency in sales. Product drops are a relatively new concept for the cannabis industry as a way to create produced scarcity. By contrast, the medical market did not have enough producing power or large enough customer base to create the quality or form of products during vertical integration that would allow “drops” to be marketed as premium products.

**Banking**

Banking is a real issue in the industry as banking with national banks is federally illegal, leaving an estimated one-third of all dispensaries being “unbanked” (Borschardt 2017b). According to the US Treasury’s anti-money laundering guidelines, banks are prohibited from dealing with funds accumulated
from illegal means, which means any legal company that even touches cannabis as a commodity is restricted from using federal banks. As banks are federal entities, cannabis revenue is still considered “black money” to the US government (Caulkins et al. 2016, 228). MasterCard, Visa, Google, and Apple Pay have all refused to work with cannabis retailers until the federal government has officially legalized the industry. Currently, ATMs are in dispensary waiting rooms for patients to take out cash, a system that works on misleading the banks as to what the company is actually selling. This system lasts a limited time as national banks consistently uncover fraudulent accounts and close them, with new accounts needing to be opened in their place. Some dispensaries creatively tried their own brand of loadable debit cards for easy use though this tactic was later shut down by the state.

In this way, banks are also banned from filing for bankruptcy and also cannot receive patents or trademarks for their highly coveted cannabis commodities (Davenport 2019, 116). So then, how does the majority of the cannabis industry do its banking? The government has created workarounds for state industries working with financial institutions via government “memos” that guide the industry in practice without creating permanent legal solutions. One such memo, the Cole Memo, was drafted in 2013 under the Obama administration and set out a series of criteria that would need to be met in order to prosecute cannabis businesses on a federal level. This meant that the Justice Department’s priorities were to only target enterprises not compliant with state recreational sales laws (Hudak, 2016, p. 166). This lack of interference would only be upheld if states showed that their regulatory systems were actively being enforced and warned that federal law would be activated and applied within eight specific scenarios’. The scenarios included: Distribution of marijuana to minors; Revenue from the sale of marijuana going to criminal enterprise; Diversion of marijuana from states legal--illegal; State-authorized marijuana activity used to cover other illegal activity; Violence and the use of firearms in cultivation and distribution; Drugged driving and adverse public health consequences; Growing on public lands and environmental dangers posed by production; and Preventing possession on federal property (Bushan 2015, 193; Graham 2015, 158; Davenport 2019, 116-117)). In addition to the statement, the federal government also gave the “go-ahead” to financial institutions to start accepting monetary cannabis profits, previously illegal under
federal law. This softened stance has not eased financial institutions from being hesitant, as cannabis-run businesses are not allowed under federal law to claim bankruptcy, which aggravates risk computations for banks. The federal prohibition of cannabis continues to create obstacles in building efficient economies of scale while simultaneously allowing states leeway to incorporate cannabis regulation. (Graham 2015, 201)

When Trump was elected president in 2016, the Cole Memo was rescinded by Vice President Jeff Sessions. This especially angered Republican Senator Cory Gardner of Colorado, who politically fought back by withholding Department of Justice nominees from confirmation until the issue was resolved. Gardner did not see the memo returned, but was satisfied by then President Trump’s “assurances” that states’ rights would have the authority to authorize banking for canna-business with saying, “I support Senator Gardner…I’, watching Colorado very carefully to see what’s happening there” (Davenport 2019, 129). As of writing this dissertation, President Biden has been elected, and cannabis reform in terms of banking and finances for canna-businesses has been thought of optimistically and is expected to make progress in the coming years.

Until then, current payment methods for both medical and recreational sales are cash, cash, cash. ATMs are a staple within the dispensary, with not only one but often with multiple ATMs located throughout the dispensary. ATM’s often charge the cardholder anywhere from $2-4 dollars per transaction. Within budroom, some larger dispensaries have found a way to charge debit cards (only) by using a shell company with an ambiguous name, taking another $3-5 dollars in fees for the service. These services do not allow for exact amounts to be charged and are rounded up to the next $5 mark. For example, a $33.35 purchase will be charged at $35 with $1.65 given as change that is expected to go into the tip jar, thus avoiding the customer's chagrin in being sent back to the waiting room ATM while also replenishing the budtenders tip jar. This system allows customers the ease to just hand over their card but are often charged a fee of $3-5 dollars for the transaction, leaving the ATM within the dispensary as the more economical choice.
Conclusion

By comparing both models of cannabis distribution, a series of clear dichotomies present themselves. The corporate recreational retail store, compared with the small boutique medical dispensary, results in a different experience for the consumer and employee. The dispensary itself, in terms of layout and flow, has changed dramatically from its inception as a professional medical facility. Starting with carefully controlled experiences between one patient and one budtender, being lead through the dispensary has morphed into a carefully cultivated experience that is open-air that allows customers to feel a sense of freedom to purchase. The corporate recreational switch has allowed more levels of positions, leading employees to believe there is room for “growth” within the dispensary. The higher positions often garner better pay and benefits, with managers making a percentage of sales on a salary base rather than an hourly wage. This leads to clearly defined roles and familiar power structures found in most corporations. The medical market has less capital to provide competitive pay and benefits, with employees often in egalitarian positions, leading to similar pay-scales between all members of the team.

Budtenders themselves are often caught in the middle between both markets, as their job descriptions may take on dramatically different roles depending on which side of the industry in which one works. For medical caretakers, they are required to possess a high level of knowledge as they frequently switch between positions within a dispensary. Medical budtenders need to be more safety, and customer-oriented and are often concerned with decreasing pain or troubleshooting medical ailments with no formal experience within the medical field. Recreational budtenders resemble traditional bartenders and are asked to create an enjoyable purchasing experience that favors the entertainment aspects of the position. When thinking about comparable jobs, a pharmacist’s job role is often drastically different from a bartender’s. This has led many budtenders to themselves wonder about their positionality in the market system. Budtender moving from a small-scale dispensary into a large corporate one may experience an entire transformation in their job duties and expectations.

Another dichotomy found in the dispensary is the free-weigh vs. pre-weigh system. Free-weigh is where a product is held in jars, and the customer is allowed to choose which jar and which buds they want
from the jar. This means the budtender picks up the jar and hand measures it onto the weighing station, allowing the customer to see each piece of cannabis flower they will be getting. This system takes a lot of time and service from the budtender and is customer-centered. The pre-weigh system was adopted when recreational cannabis was legalized, and larger amounts of product needed to be funneled through the dispensary. Pre-weigh is when the product is already pre-weighed and bagged in purchasing quantities, usually by the 1/8th of an ounce. Thus, if a customer wanted 1/8th of an ounce of Ghost Train Haze, the budtender would simply pull a pre-weighed and packaged 1/8th canister and put it in the bag. This way, the customer does not actually see the exact batch of product they are getting; they can only interact with a sample in the budroom (similar to makeup or perfume counters).

The free-weigh vs. the pre-weigh system is an example of what happens when there is an economical switch from small-scale batched cannabis production under vertical integration (government regulated production) into a free-market economy with no restriction on production. The change in economic regulation inherently changes the relationships budtenders and consumers have with the product and also transforms their perceived roles under capitalist enterprise. For example, the consumers themselves are portrayed differently between each of the markets, from patients with legitimate medical ailments in need of medicine to average consumer customers looking for a recreational product like alcohol. Instead of asking, “which products will help me with a medical problem,” the question shifts to “which product will I have fun taking.” This framing of the commodity is especially pertinent to this ethnography when taking into account they are the exact same product. This identity crisis of pharmacy vs. bar forms the basis of the cannabis market dichotomy.

To summarize the two systems further, the free-weigh system within the medical dispensary caters to the patient’s preference and maintains quality control for patients. The pre-weigh system in the recreational sector speeds up the number of time customers spend within the store but also takes away their freedom to choose specific products of flower. This is visually different as customers have become used to seeing large jars behind friendly budtender faces, which have been switched out of cleverly branded small pre-paid packages of product.
Taking the red card out of the purchasing experience also changes how people are treated within the dispensary. In the medical market, patients are highly regarded as they are needed to continue production and continue profits via “signing” over their right to grow plants. In the recreational market, consumers hold no control over the production of products or profits unless they use their voice to share negative experiences. Therefore, in the medical market under vertical integration, medical patients held more value as they also controlled the production process. Recreational dispensaries count on a large out-of-state tourist market for their profits, thus decreasing the importance of budtender-consumer relationships and increasing the importance of name recognition, advertising, and branding.

In the next chapter, the information provided will form the foundation of industry knowledge needed to fully comprehend the roles of the budtender within the dispensary. Up until this point, we have yet to hear the polyvocality of those within the industry themselves and their own positionality regarding the cannabis industry. The next chapter describing budtenders will elucidate the cannabis industry by providing a human face to the annual two-billion-dollar economic market (Leafly Jobs Report, 2021). The budtenders live and work among these restrictions, and the next chapter will uncover how they have been unfairly exploited in the process.
CHAPTER SIX:
THE BUDTENDER: ETHNOGRAPHY OF LABOR UNDER CANNABIS CAPITALISM

Introduction

Weed Wench, Budtender, Dealer? What about Advisor, Counselor, or Mentor? Better yet, could it be Expert, Specialist, or Consultant? Who am I buying weed from in the legal market? The term budtender is an exceptionally hard-to-define word, and if you are wondering what it exactly means, then you’re in the majority. The first indication of the creation of the term budtender can be traced to the 1997 article in the San Jose Mercury-News in California to describe the position of a cannabis supplier (Merriam-Webster 1997). The term budtender, a play on bartender, may not be a “one size fit all” term for all the i/legal markets, as the position often changes meaning according to context, time, and regulatory framework (Stamps 2016).

When searching the Urban Dictionary (2011) for clues as to what a budtender’s role is to help uncover how this term is used colloquially, in real-time with current linguistics, the top correctly voted definition is described as:

Budtender:

Definition: The person at a medical marijuana “dispensary,” or “clinic,” who tends to the patients’ medicinal needs. He/she works with you and helps you decide what will be the ideal medicine for you to purchase, and in what quantity.

These are also some of the luckiest motherfuckers on the face of the earth. Despite that, you should still tip them as heavily as you can possibly afford to.

In use: “The budtenders here are so helpful and friendly!” “That budtender is really hot. I think I’m gonna blow him and see if I can get any free medicine out of it.”

Urban Dictionary 2011
The reference is indicative of the many “brands” of budtender that exist and their problematic, mutually exclusive, roles. The in-use reference for example, indicates that they are “helpful and friendly” like a retail associate, sexually charged as in a late-night bar atmosphere, and “free medicine,” indicating the medical industry spin. Taking this into consideration, the definition should also be compared to the more formal references, such as Merriam-Webster Dictionary, who classified the term budtender as a “word we’re watching.” The term budtender was even entered as a final contender for American Dialect Society’s 2014 word of the year (Merriam-Webster 2018). The website loosely defines a budtender as: a shop clerk who provides bartender-like guidance about different strains of pot as well as providing the pot itself (Merriam-Webster 2018).

The position of Budtender is further confused when compared to international quasi-legal markets that have pre-dated the cannabis industry in the states. In Amsterdam, for example, budtenders are officially called “Dealers” or “Personnel.” Amsterdam “dealers” only resemble Colorado budtenders in the fact that they weigh (occasionally) and sell cannabis, but also have other duties not associated with the Colorado market, like serving customers non-medicated food and beverage products and watching customers while they consume. Jacque’s ethnography of dealers in coffeeshops in Amsterdam demonstrates incidents of customers vomiting, falling over, and coming in already intoxicated with alcohol (2019). In Colorado, these incidents are taken out of the equation since consumption does not occur within the store. For the European market in Amsterdam, the term budtender makes logical sense over the term “dealer” since coffeeshops closely resemble a daytime bar. The term “bar” conveys a physical place of consumption, often with a subculture associated with the brand or product, where people come together to interact, meet people, and consume a shared commodity (Stamps 2016). In this i/legal system, the term budtender matches the similarities of a bartender, without the term being used in the European market.

Some states, like California, use both the term “Personnel” as well as the more scientific-sounding term of “Technician” in addition to budtender. “The technician role at our dispensaries is a critical and very popular position in applicants,” touts Lopes Nunes, a hiring manager at a California
dispensary.” The manager went on: “These personnel are oftentimes the people who are patients see and interact with the most, so finding a good fit that is both efficient – as well as conversant with cannabis and has good customer service skills – is an important balance when considering a potential hire” (Ward 2019, 44). Here the term technician and patient invoke a clinical atmosphere, with a focus on customer education and service.

In the following sections, anyone performing service positions within the dispensary is referred to as a budtender as even management performs budtender duties due to the fact that no other normative terms are being used at this moment within the context of Colorado. The infancy of the new industry has yet to fully understand the complex role of the budtender in the legal market system, and this section helps illuminate who these “budtenders” really are; their lives, families, and living situations, and how they conceptualized their own positions while working inside a Colorado dispensary.

This chapter provides an ethnographic account taken from 33 semi-structured interviews with budtenders who worked in the cannabis industry at various points in its il/legalization. This analysis of the budtender position also takes shape from ethnographic data collected while working within the legal market and takes shape in some forms as an auto-ethnography (Fieldnote entries). In a Marxist political economy, it is the labor itself that creates all value within the cannabis capitalism commodity chain. As Thunderstorm observed, “The fact is that people grow, traffic, and sell pot outside of the economic mainstream for a reason- the pot sector actually grants living wages whereas legal employment options do not” (2017,137). In many ways, budtenders operate as a nexus between both sectors of illegal and legal consumption of cannabis, and many are structurally encouraged to sell cannabis through illegal channels to survive. This section aims to show how budtenders are not being paid their true value of the labor profit under cannabis capitalism in Colorado and also shows how structural violence keeps these labor workers in poverty traps that are difficult to emerge from.
**Budtender Migrants**

Many budtenders have previously been involved in illegal networks, growing and selling cannabis as amateurs in local black-market economies. These informal workers have grown tired of the constant anxiety and risks associated with illegal production and look for “freedom” within the Colorado framework. Experience in the informal economy helps with customer relations, and compatibility in that budtenders need to be able to speak the jargon and gain rapport from customers that may have varying levels of knowledge and different cultural terms for products.

Many of the young migrant workers who have made the trip to Colorado are disappointed in the lack of opportunities found once they arrived; marijuana migrant transplants looking for work have been turned away, cheated, manipulated, and exploited by the industry (Bodley 2015). Kim Houser, a professor of business law, confirms the exploitation by saying that “The marijuana industry is actually being treated worse than prostitution rings and gambling organizations, which is ridiculous” (Bodley 2015). Because the cannabis industry is a cash-only economy, many are only paid in cash wages or through third-party banking systems, creating financial issues for struggling youth. The cash economy makes it difficult for workers to obtain and exchange forms of capital because they cannot prove wages through pay stubs or get loans from banks based on their wages due to its federal illegality (Bodley 2015; Crawford 2014). In addition, many informal workers that use to obtain profits from the illegal industry are now barred by the state from taking part in any part of the legal economy, siphoning out funds from already low-income communities and pushing illegal economies into focusing their effort on the sale of harder narcotics. As the Weed Blog (2015) warns:

> One thing that I always tell people when they ask me how to get into the marijuana industry is to PROCEED WITH CAUTION. I have seen so many people get burned in this industry. This industry is full of sharks that will use you, abuse you, steal your credit, not pay you for your labor, and leave you under a bus. That’s not a big deal if you are in between jobs, get a job at a local dispensary, and have time and energy to burn. But if you are going to travel across the country to work for someone you have not met before, and the job sounds too good to be true, you are likely setting yourself up for a nightmare scenario.
The cannabis industry can be looked at as another adventure, especially for someone looking to explore life outside formal education. Since budtending has a low level of entry in terms of education and experience, budtending is often thought of as a position you might take on to “find oneself.” Though this is not an uncommon narrative, people who leave their comfortable desk jobs with health care and other benefits for the lure of the marijuana gold rush may become bitter. Sam, a budtender migrant who moved to Colorado from Minnesota three years previously to enter the cannabis market as a budtender, spoke heavily about her previous corporate life and her financial stability. She had finally concluded to retire as a budtender and expanded on her decision-making process by saying:

The only way I am surviving is that I got a big life insurance check from my mom and had good savings from my corporate job. I have a conversation with myself every day, did I just waste three years of my life on something I am passionate about, but there is no way I can afford to stay in it. I am sitting here right now at a crossroads where I don’t know if I want to apply to another job in this industry, which I love and am so great at, or do I go back to corporate where I hate myself and everything about my job but I can afford taking care of the check engine light that’s on my car right now.

Sam’s narrative shows the juxtaposition between doing what she loves and being financially stable. Unfortunately, in her case, her dreams of being successful in the industry had come to an end.

**Budtender as Bricoleur**

In many ways, the budtender position fits with Levi-Strauss’ concepts of bricolage and bricoleur as outlined by his structural work in The Savage Mind (1962). The French word bricolage can be broken down into phonemes bri- to break, and colage, to fix or merge back together. Levi-Strauss relates this concept to traditional myth-making in that a bricolage of myth is created with “the remains and debris of events... fossilized evidence of the history of an individual or a society” (1962, 21-2). The bar-tender's name can be broken down into morphemes as in bric to be destroyed into parts, and then colage a rearrangement into something similar to past cultural-linguistic categories, transforming the term bar-tender bud-tender. Budtenders do not just share vestiges of a bartender name but also a mismatched
collage in job descriptions and roles. Especially the medical budtender, a bricolage of a pharmacist, retail
associate, and drug dealer, each part is taken and rearranged to create a new role within a transitioning
industry itself (informal and formal economies). As Levi-Strauss explained, “The elements which the
bricoleur collects and uses are pre-constrained … restricted by the fact they are drawn from the language
where they already possess a sense which sets limits on their freedom of maneuver (Levi-Strauss 1962,
19). In this passage, Levi-Strauss expresses that the budtender is often constrained by the language used
to describe their position, as evidenced by the overall confusion of the service budtenders are required to
provide and their mandatory flair buttons that tell consumers, “I am not a doctor.”

Levi-Strauss takes his analysis further to the dichotomy between engineer/philosopher/scientist,
described as unconstrained by material cultures, with the bricoleur, which can only use what is available
in his workshop of tools. These concepts are introduced within the context of myth-making and can be
extended further into a conversation on the difference between western "concepts" and traditional
"signs." In the same way that a bricoleur only has the tools he possesses' to create items, budtenders can
take items they have available to them in the dispensary to create new commodities, as in the form of
luxury cannabis products that combine concentrates and different types of cannabis forms into new
products that have yet to exist on the market. The bricoleur's manual labor, in combination with his
mastery of tools, creates new objects that have a sense of craft identity attached to the commodity. At the
same time, he is also constrained by the materials he has at hand- he can only create items with things that
already exist in the market, making new commodities by mashing forms together, or borrowing from
other industries and adding a cannabis component to it. This is evidenced by the cannabis sommelier, the
bricoleur of cannabis evaluation, and the bricolage of cannabis beer, wine, and food products on the
market.

Simultaneously, the bricoleurs as budtenders also partake in workplace cannabis activism by
taking on positions in an il/legal industry itself and thus, self-sacrificing for the industry by contributing
"embodied manual labor" while constantly navigating difficult regulatory protections in hopes of creating
a sustainable new industry. The budtender then self-sacrifices his fractured identity and pieced together
labor in the hopes of federal legalization in the future. This matches the bricoleur in that “The bricoleur may not ever complete his purpose, but he always puts something of himself into it.” (Levi-Strauss 1962, 21). However, as the bricolage relies only on the breaking and reframing of signs to his position, he also adds something into himself as he creates or mends the items. Meanwhile, the engineer relies on institutions and teams of others to understand and create new conceptions of reality by embracing an ethos beyond the natural or material world to "achieve total mastery of them.” When juxtaposed with the bricoleur, the engineer looks to "modern" concepts rather than the repurposing of old ones.

**Replaceable Labor and Job Creation**

Job creation has exploded in Colorado with stacks of resumes ready to fill the more than 18,000 annual new position openings and adding $2.4 billion back into the Colorado economy (Johnson 2014, 2). Cannabis job fairs, held seasonally, attract thousands of willing workers for just a few hundred jobs offered, creating high competition for wages. The cannabis economy does not operate only within its newly created sector; rather, it expands from itself into already established markets. From cannabis lawyers to grow house contractors, real estate agents, tourism operations, and cannabis big data analysts, it seems like every sector of the economy now has cannabis-focused experts.

Experts say the job market boom likely comes from the reduction of black-market sales (Ingraham 2016). Black market sales in Colorado resembled pre-capitalist societies in that both depended on close relationships built on strong gift exchange and bartering systems. After the legal economy, Colorado has seen an intense specialization of occupations helped by technology advances that no longer rely solely on relationships of personal exchange (Bourdieu 2000). According to Davenport, there are two primary types of struggling within the cannabis industry: “Those who are coming from the black or grey market and are struggling due to a lack of business acumen; and those who are coming from the business world who have no experience with the cannabis community and are struggling to connect with their target market” (Davenport 2019, 198). The exceptionally high turnover rate can be credited to low wages, a constant influx of new migrants looking for positions in the industry, and the transient nature of younger
workers. An analysis of turnover rate was undertaken with Headset sales data from each il/legal cannabis state’s which concluded that only 38% of cannabis budtenders actually stayed. Their research shows that compared to Washington, where 47% of budtenders stayed in their positions over a 12 month period, only 38% did the same in Colorado. The data also showed that of all budtenders in the industry that were surveyed, 44% of budtender employees were new and also left that same calendar year. Hazel related her experience about becoming a budtender:

I started getting involved in different industry events and learning that way. I learned about the reputation and style. Just like anything else, there are different varieties of dispensaries in the community. You may have one that is super corporate and some mom-and-pop shops. One family will own 30 dispensaries, so it can be very corporate. So you find what style you're looking for and what the fit is for you. As soon as I got onto craigslist, I got the job. I studied and made my self-flashcards and I wanted to impress them with how much I knew. I became really well versed in it. My first interview- I was upbeat and friendly, I give a good first impression, I do all the interview and I have all the skills, but I did not have the knowledge base of the in and outs of the scientific genetics and the cannabinoids, which was huge for me, I finished that first interview and well, they said, you're amazing, but you don’t know shit about cannabis. So, he was like, I would love to hire you but I want you to come back and impress me with things you know, so go home and come back. I came back the following week and he was testing me as far as cannabinoids are. CBC he tested me, and he was impressed I knew what CBC was, not just THC and CBD. And I have been in the industry at that moment.

Having such a high rate of budtender turnover can cause anger and resentment with customers. Customers like to get to know their budtenders for a variety of reasons. They often spend a great deal of time talking about consumer preferences but also might have to educate the budtender about an illness or disease they are dealing with. Having to re-explain these personal issues frequently gives little consumer confidence in the knowledge or performance of budtender positions. It also causes issues when it comes to new budtender migrants who may just be starting in the industry. When local or long-time customers come into the dispensary, they are often more well versed than the budtender who is supposedly helping them out. As one consumer noted after a negative experience with a new budtender: “They got another girl in at Avalanche. She had no idea what she was fucking doing, and when I left, I heard her complain
about no tip. I was like, ‘Bitch I was coming here before it was even a dispensary. I be eatin my Wendy’s up in this place before you were even born!’” The high turnover rate of employees can cause customers to lose confidence in the dispensary and also encourages them not to tip budtenders as they don’t provide good service for local regulars.

**Barriers to Entry**

The main barrier to entry into the cannabis industry in Colorado is the Medical Marijuana Enforcement Division (MED) badge. This is the official stamp of approval from the state of Colorado that says you can work and operate within a medical or recreational dispensary. To obtain a med badge, an individual must complete a series of steps and restrictions. There are two main types of badges provided by the MED under the “badge” heading. Firstly, there is the most common type of MED badge, which is green in color and called the “support badge.” The badge was designed for lower positions within the industry, such as front desk positions, trimmers, and budtending (the majority of dispensary labor positions). These badges are low in cost at $75 for two years, but the cost is expected to come from the budtender themselves. The other type of badge is called a “key badge” and is blue, which signifies in name and color that the person is responsible for making managerial decisions and can be held accountable for operational decisions. Green badge holders are not legally allowed to be within a dispensary without a blue badge holder. These have a much higher cost barrier with a $250 application fee.

Regardless of color designation, both forms of badges go through the same general process and have similar barriers to entry. Firstly, all budtenders need to have a Colorado driver's license or identity card, which means they must be residents of Colorado and prove their residency with a form of mail that has an official address on it. Individuals who apply for any tier of the badge but are in default on student loans or are not caught up on child support payments are restricted from obtaining a badge. Also, anyone with any type of felony within the last five years or a felony drug conviction is banned from work in the industry. Individuals with cannabis crime arrests within the last ten years are unlikely to receive a positive
decision. In addition, the state's website also warns applicants, “Before You Apply, be aware that applying for or holding a MED Employee License and working within the Colorado Regulated Marijuana Space may have adverse Federal Immigration consequences.” So potentially, residents without citizenship may also face federal problems when applying through the state. The MED badge is the responsibility of the applicant and must be completed before entering the workplace. Thus, the cost of the badge is put on the worker every two years. In addition, for most dispensaries, if one gets promoted to a new management position while on the job, the budtender is required to obtain the higher level of the key badge and pay for it before they begin the new position.

The MED badge has symbolic representation associated with its acquisition. First, it signifies that the holder is in many ways “clean” enough from a records standpoint to be trusted in the industry to act as a responsible vendor. The background check and fingerprinting that happens during the process gives the holder a sense of identity that shows that they are fit for the position and are absolved of being characterized as “bad actors” prior to legalization. The colors themselves of each level of the badge corresponds to the amount of power one holds within the dispensary. Blue means that the badge holder is only a “support,” Green designates a “key badge” and is given to managers who are responsible for the green support badge holders and are allowed extra privileges due to their status. Green badge holders are allowed to be in sections of the dispensary by themselves and serve as the person responsible for the daily processes of the dispensary. Red, the highest honor, is awarded to the license owners themselves and are given the most privilege and power in the cannabis hierarchy. Red badge owners are responsible for all the other levels but also are the ones who own the profits garnered by their dispensary. In many ways, the badges signify class relations as they also correspond to income. Support blue badges make the least amount of income and are hired on an hourly basis, making them the lowest form of labor within the dispensary. Green badge holders often may be given yearly salaries, which roughly equates them to the middle class along with their middle management positions. Lastly, the red badge signifies the upper-class bourgeoisie, who own the means of production and also the rights to the profit that is created by the other key badge holders.
The MED badge can also function as a symbol of insider-outsider relations in the industry. It is often an unspoken rule that customers who frequent other dispensaries are “inside” the cannabis sector and are given discounts and freedoms that non-badged consumers would normally not be afforded. This is especially true when budtenders who work at different dispensaries shop at each other’s stores; budtenders may be given tours of their friend’s dispensaries or grow house affiliations that would not be possible without the security of the badge. Budtenders who shop outside their own dispensary brands are also awarded special budtender discounts on products due to their affiliation in the industry. Discounts may range from a percentage off, to free non-cannabis products such as extra pen cartridges, rolling papers, or paraphernalia. Having a badge and showing it to the budtender who is serving you also cuts down on sales tactics, introductions to products, and beginner knowledge and allows the two budtenders to meet on their own terms. This often is reflected in code-switching of language that occurs when two budtenders are talking, as they know that the other is familiar with focal language regarding the production and sale of cannabis in a formal marketplace.

**Marijuana Enforcement Division**

Once the applicant has the roughly 14-page application printed and filled out with the proper documentation, they then need to make a physical appointment at one of the four MED locations spread throughout Colorado. These appointments wait times can vary greatly, from a few days to a few months for some locations, so some budtender may need to wait several months before starting a position, regardless of if they were offered one. Applicants will need to make an appointment online. The MED office looks like any other government office one would encounter. Once arrived, hopeful budtenders are ushered in a larger back room that resembles a domino course of chairs and desks, similar to the DMV. Two large desks are on one side, facing a string of seating rows facing the desk. Once inside, the budtender then hands over their paperwork pack and Colorado ID, takes a number, and waits their turn. When the budtender’s name is called, they go up to the desk to speak with the attendant who takes their paperwork and has them fill out their address on an empty envelope. This will later become the envelope
that gets sent back to them with their badge in it if the application is approved. Once they provided the paperwork, they move on to the next desk area to have their fingerprints taken. The fingerprint specialist will slide each finger on the computer screen and capture your prints for the database. These fingerprints will be run through government databases, along with a full background check of your record. The same person who does the fingerprints also usually takes the official picture for the badge. The technician will then have the budtender sit down to wait again and call them up a third time to pay the application fee. Once paid, they are told to wait for the decision in the mail. If they are lucky enough to be on the receiving end of a badge, a budtender hopeful is now ready to send off their resume.

During medical-only sales at the beginning of legalization, the main place to find cannabis jobs was exclusively on Craigslist. Job descriptions often ask for a copy of the badge or the number to make sure they are qualified to work in the industry. As the industry has grown and became more segmented with every year in an open market system, cannabis jobs slowly grew and expanded, moving to other more mainstream job search engines like Indeed or LinkedIn.

There is a large range of skills that are valued for a budtender position, and it depends on the type of cannabis dispensary and accompanying brand identity as to who will eventually be hired within that company. Some are only looking for those who are excited about the industry and are users of cannabis. Other hiring managers will go through a lengthy interview process, quizzing the applicant on cannabis molecules, dosing, and customer service questions. Others are simply looking for a “culture” fit, especially smaller boutique dispensaries that need to have someone who can do a variety of tasks and work within small teams.

Regardless of the type of dispensary one chooses, there are shared characteristics that are preferred. Budtenders need to be able to do simple math as they are handling a large amount of cash daily. They also need to understand the varieties of cannabis being offered – product knowledge – and be able to communicate effectively as the amount of slang and differing weights and properties of cannabis can be varied. Terminology for cannabis needs to be quantified into measurements such as grams, quarters ounces, pounds, etc. to be packaged and handed over to customer/patient. For example, many individuals
come in looking for a “zip,” the budtenders need to have the insider knowledge to know that is argot for an ounce in street terms and be able to weigh it out properly according to the customer’s preference.

Many job recruiters are also looking for individuals that have come from either the service industry or the retail sector. A common set of questions used during the interview process is: “Do you know how to push a product? Have you worked in retail? Can you handle cash?”

The state requires no training for the industry as a whole, nor does it require one to pass any examination or medical course to sell medical or recreational cannabis. Though educational training programs are emerging, such as Clover Leaf University, the “first accredited university specializing in phytotechnology to be approved, regulated and licensed by the Colorado Department of Higher Education’s Private Occupational School Board” (Cloverleafuniversity.com n.d.). Classes as of 2016 were viewed as over-priced at $350 for four hours for individuals looking for a minimum wage job. Online budtender courses are beginning to proliferate as budtenders leave the industry trying to find other ways to make a living from their budtender knowledge. The most common way a budtender learns how to do their job is one-on-one training from senior budtenders or from corporate training programs that are required at their dispensary. (Cloverleafuniversity.com n.d.)

For many budtenders, having a badge gives them considerable cultural capital in their micro-communities, especially if they have friends and family in other states, that they attempt to convert to economic capital. The badge itself is an important identity creator and represents legal legitimacy as budtenders have been unable, and perhaps ashamed, of their previous drug use or dealings. When coming into legal markets, budtenders may feel a sense of accomplishment. Employees of one cannabis dispensary can often flaunt their badge at other dispensaries for a special discount and are “allowed” to go into certain sections of other dispensaries or grow houses that the public cannot access. While being interviewed, Amanda commented on the cultural capital badges hold by saying:

I saw a lot of girls, they have become so entitled for a badge that anyone can get. I just think like, why do you feel you can talk to people, treat people the way you do because you have a badge? You know what I mean? Sense of entitlement because they work in a dispensary and have a fucking weed badge that literally anyone can
get? [Laughs] You know? Like, I don’t get it? Especially since I have a cosmetology badge, I am not out flexing that shit.

Here, Amanda likens the badge to another form of state certification, the cosmetology certificate, which is much more laborious and time-consuming. Badges can also be used as signs of power within the dispensary since they are the embodiment of hierarchy. Those with green badges are branded as labor, while blue badges are branded as management, giving a clear color-coded order to status and power.

**Medical Budtending**

Imagine it’s 2009, and you are a budtender. Your job is to sell products that are not in child-proof packaging. These products have no labeling, no potency requirements, they have no ingredients, and you’re not even charging taxes. Your job as a budtender in 2009 is to purchase pounds of cannabis from the black market, off the street from whoever would walk in and sell it to you and retail this product to medical marijuana patients as medicine. I know this was the experience in 2009, because this is exactly what I experienced as a budtender in 2009...We all know this industry pulls in billions of dollars every year, but many of us neglect to realize where these billions of dollars are transacted. Is it doctors and pharmacists that dispense this medicine to sick people? No. It is budtenders. They are the spearhead of the entire industry. – Max

In Colorado, the term did not always start with “budtender.” In the early days, medical marijuana still dominated the market, and for dispensaries to put up a reputable front for the general public, they modeled the dispensary off a typical medical office rather than a retail shop. The term also holds different meanings for different budtenders. For budtenders working in the early years of legalization, the role of budtender-as-caregiver was mainly to educate “patients.” This was a priority for everyone involved as the dispensaries were terrified to lose their license due to highly publicized events like overdosing consumers.

With the newly legalized commodity, Coloradans didn’t know what to expect, and the research wasn’t necessarily accessible. One budtender participant Max explained to me he was one of the very first generations of budtenders, before they even had a name, back in 2009 when dispensaries were not regulated or even really legalized in the state. He recalls having the dispensary where he worked robbed and giving out free “dabs” as one might find at a wine tasting. This was when the regulations and models
of dispensaries had yet to be solidified, and consumers wanted to taste all the products before buying, similar to tasting booths at Costco, or as he describes it: “Baskin Robbins style, there was no regulation. No regulation. It [cannabis] was in sandwich bags with a sharpie, no labels, no stickers, no nothing, it was the wild west of the industry that will never be again.” He conceptualized the job as more health and education centered, sitting down, and taking time with “patients” to figure out which cannabis strain was the best for them. He points to the change in perception of budtenders as time moved on, from a more intellectual job description, closely aligned with the medical field, to one that is no longer valued. He said: “Taking time with customers was problematic for management because they wanted me to sell the weed quickly and move on.”

The fieldwork journal presented below expands on the researcher's individual experience returning to the industry after five years since her initial budtender experience. It demonstrates how quickly the industry changes in terms of labor demographics, dispensary segmentation of labor, and cultural differences between budtenders.

Fieldwork Journal 8/12/2020: While working at the front desk a phone call came in, Kirsten answered and looked at me “do we have any zips?” she said looking at me utterly confused? I laughed and said, “yead dude, a zip is an ounce.” I flashbacked to my first job in the industry too, as a millennial who was in her early twenties and had stayed out of the large quantities black market, I also had no idea what a zip was. I would be lying if I said I did not feel some sort of comfort knowing that I wasn’t the only white girl newbie who had made this mistake and embarrassed themselves in front of their peers. After returning to the industry many years later, my fellow budtenders were now in a completely different generation than me - we exchanged information and relearned each other’s identifying cultural markers as we sat for hours alone in the shop with no customers, I taught them old cannabis slang, 90’s hip hop, and what flair was, while they taught me about Yu-Gi-Oh! card games, mumble rap, and Tik Tok. It occurred to me that in a few generations, high school kids may not share the same cannabis experiences as we had, as the product will no longer be illegal. What will cannabis culture look like then?

This fieldwork journal reflects on the quickly changing nature of the industry itself and the ways in which labor relations will continue to evolve. The first generation of legal budtenders came from the millennial generation as they were perfectly set up to take on the roles of
budtenders in the newly formed market. As Millennials began to age, their economic needs became more permanent as they entered into new phases of their lives. Many either left their positions for more stable jobs in other industries or were given roles within dispensaries that fell into higher earning brackets as the industry began to segment labor within the dispensary itself. The segmentation of labor meant that those who had been in the industry for a significant amount of time without a promotion (because there was nowhere to go except owning a dispensary) were now in artificially created senior positions from within by breaking up budtender positions into various segmented tasks that corresponded with levels and income.

**Medical Advice**

In a medical dispensary, a medical budtender is more likely to take the transaction more seriously and should be able to tell patients more quality information than a recreational customer. By being a medical customer, it signals that the patient should know more than a “beginner” and can skip some of the introductory explanations. Medical budtenders are more likely to feel responsible for their patients, leaning towards the medical oath of “do no harm” than recreational budtenders. Customers as well are more invested in their relationship with their budtenders. As Laurance explained: “The medical patients are more educated to begin with once they come in, I feel they are advanced, they paid money for this medical rec, and they usually know what they want. It’s so much easier to talk with them about products. Whereas now, person after person, I have to start over again with simple concepts like indica and sativa,” he said, groaning.

Due to legal complaints and risk, all budtenders are no longer allowed to give overt medical advice. Budtenders as well began to feel an undue sense of pressure to provide sound medical advice not seen in other retail industries. The fact that scientists and doctors have just recently been given governmental protections to start working with cannabis in clinical and lab settings, there has been a historical lack of current medical research, which adds to the confusion of information (Newhard and
Dolphin 2019). Budtenders began to get more scientific and medical questions from customers than pharmacists. As Mary Ann described her experience:

Sometimes people forget that we are not medical doctors even though we are trying to help them with their medical problems. We may know some medical stuff that we picked up from the industry, but it changes so much, and you are never really sure, so if you say, “oh, this helps with XYZ,” and they come back and they say, “oh this didn't help me at all” it’s like, well my body is different than yours, everyone's cannabinoid systems are different and respond to things in a different way. They are still researching how all this weed stuff works. It makes it difficult for us to say for sure which products will help.

For the recreational market, advice is even more strict. Many dispensaries requirebudtenders to wear buttons that specifically say, “I AM NOT A DOCTOR.” When asked why they require the buttons, José told me that it cut down on question-and-answer time with recreational customers and also protected their brand from lawsuits. José mentioned that “If someone came in and said “I need something for anxiety or PTSD, what do you recommend?” he would be required by his company to respond with “We are not qualified to give medical advice, but I would suggest…” These pre-determined responses help keep the company safe from liability, and also protects the budtenders who may pick up incorrect medical information.

**Budtenders as Value Creators/Taste Makers**

Budtenders are the first to hear of new products, new techniques, and new research. Many of the budtenders were asked if they did any outside research. Few said some, specifically on new strains coming to the shop, but most admitted that no, they do not do any outside research when not on the job. Since customers, especially locals, enjoy the local rapport created between budtender and customer, they are always excited to ask about rumors or things they have seen in the media, and in many ways, are sources of education for the budtender themselves. In this way, budtenders are brought information pertaining to their own jobs so that the actual research of products or cannabis happens organically through the use of word-of-mouth rather than research.
Anecdotes brought in from customers are then circulated within the budroom to separate perceived truths from fiction, and if accepted by peers, are then redistributed to other customers, creating feedback of information between customers and budtenders. More often than not, these distributed bits of information create product value and expert knowledge based on the quality of information. Once specific tastemakers are roughly defined through the feedback loop, budtenders have the choice to share or not share that information with customers to help them choose products. For example, Budtenders create product value by “hyping” expensive drops within their stores, spreading the word about when and what may be dropped at any given time, often leaving die-hard consumers following various social media platforms of dispensaries to “catch” these highly sought-after bits of information.

One such feedback information loop was witnessed at Centennial Health with processing a concentration product called “rosin.” Two customers started explaining to budtenders that they were using their sister’s hair straightening iron to extract oil from whole flower buds simply by pressing them in between the ceramic plates. Budtenders did not believe them as this seemed too “easy” compared to the current techniques of extracting resin. Budtenders then began asking other customers if they had heard of this technique, with some customers saying yes, they had. This information continued to be exchanged until it became common practice and verifiable mode of rosin dab extraction. Within only a few years, using hair straighteners is now outmoded in the cannabis community and can be seen in a plethora of online tutorials.

The creation of value by the budtender is also starting to be portrayed in media representations that show an idealized version of their position, which adds legitimacy to their position as tastemakers. Conversely, budtenders that are portrayed in movies and on TV may not meet the day-to-day expectation of a budtender’s position. Music videos like “Bud Tender” by Baby Bash create an unrealistic and romanticized version of a female budtender. The music video depicts a scantily clad female budtender with long elbow-length black gloves practically bathing in fruity strains of cannabis, creating a comically exaggerated view of the reality of the market. While they smoke blunts inside a dispensary, Baby Bash sings the chorus: “I wanna get high/She got my supply/ Bring what makes me high/She’s my budtender,
yeah.” Regardless of its incorrect portrayal, this media is circulated and consumed by newer generations of cannabis experimenters, creating new ideals of what qualities a budtender should possess and the type of experience they are looking to get out of the transaction.

**Rules and Regulations: Budtender Training**

In the first years of medical marijuana sales, there was an abundant lack of training because there simply was no standard of practice. “Training” would often be done within the dispensary itself with co-workers and key badge holders. During the early years, this caused massive confusion as products, rules, and regulations were constantly changing and emerging. Training and accountability systems were lacking, which left dispensary owners at risk of losing their licenses. Training of budtenders is often left to the discretion of the dispensary in question, as they are held responsible for the mismanagement of their retail establishment. For larger corporate companies, a traditional training period is often mandatory for those coming into the company or brand. At Dark Solar, there is a three-day process of budtender training roughly 17 hours online. If the budtenders don’t pass with 90 percent of answers correct in each sub-section quiz, they have to retake the course and pay a fee. Smaller boutique dispensaries are often lacking in capital and labor to produce such lengthy training videos. These dispensaries often resort to third-party educational systems or ask budtenders to read certain books, watch YouTube videos, and so forth. Medical dispensaries, corporate or boutique, often require an extra level of training as they deal with different types of sales and more restrictions on patients. Most of the training acquired for the medical sales relates to identifying information for new patients, plant counts, and membership paperwork. This added paperwork (that is not required for recreational sales) needs to be scanned into both POS and METRC tracking systems and requires extra time.

Training videos are not always followed. Quick changes in rules and regulations often leave the training videos worthless within a matter of years, if not months. This can also lead to confusion of state rules that need to be followed, especially when taking in various forms of ID or sales limits. One instance that I witnessed involves a discrepancy in the training videos and sales. A newly hired front desk
associate at Dark Solar had finished his three days of training and was ready to be at the front desk. An out-of-state recreational consumer came in with an expired identification card: “I can’t take it,” the front desk associate said. “Sorry, I can only take Colorado temporary IDs, not out of state.” The customer angrily replied: “You fuckin’ kidding me? I just drove all the way out here from Nebraska!” The front desk associate said: “I’m sorry, I have to follow compliance by the state.” As the man stormed out, a budtender overheard the conversation and went to clarify with Elizabeth, the manager on duty. When Elizabeth came out, she said, “Hey, everyone, listen up, just to clarify, we can take out-of-state temporary IDs.” “But the training says,…” started the new budtender. “I don’t give a fuck what the training says, it’s not right, and we are going to start losing money if we are sending people away like that,” Elizabeth replied. This conversation indicates that even though training exists, it is quickly outdated or actively dismissed when convenient. Employees are asked to listen to their managers and not the official rules in training. This leads to ambiguity in rules and regulations and puts both budtenders and dispensaries at risk.

Tracking Systems

For cannabis legalization to function smoothly, the state realized they would need information systems to track and regulate public consumption of cannabis to see if legalization and the market were performing as expected. Currently, two computer programs are used within the market to regulate commodities- one for the business owners of dispensaries and one for the state government. The first is the customer and commodity tracker in the industry often called a Point of Sale (POS) tracking system in other service and retail markets. These programs are used by canna-businesses to collect and store information about their patients/members, schedule and order of patients coming in and waiting, and also functions as a commodity tracking system and register. Common brand names of cannabis POS systems are MJ Freeway, Flowhub, and Greenbits, among others.

The Marijuana Enforcement Tracking Reporting Compliance (METRC) system is regulated by the state and tracks patient identification numbers, medical patient cards, every plant and seed in
warehouses, as well as all packages that are exchanged between various points. METRC also tracks patient memberships within specific dispensaries and sees how many plants each dispensary is allowed to be producing at any given time. If a patient tries to take advantage of the system and sign up with multiple dispensaries as a member, their identification number turns red within the system to alert the state and other dispensaries that they have already signed over their plants and are therefore ineligible to participate as a member of another dispensary.

Unfortunately, there has been much discussion about the overall reliability of Point of Sale systems in conjunction with METRC. It is important to note that the two computer systems do not communicate electronically with each other in any way, and the information stored in each cannot be cross-referenced. In addition, both systems rely on the information being entered (or not entered) into them by budtenders, whose only oversight is their store managers. The reliability of these systems in emergencies is also a grave concern. Colorado’s dramatic weather can take down internet and electricity frequently if large winter storms arrive. When this happens, budtenders are forced to track sales and weights via physical paper until the system is back on, or risk losing their license from the state.

**Looping**

Since dispensary POS systems are essential for staying compliant in the industry, new POS systems are adding new features to help stay compliant between the dispensary and the state. For example, daily patient limits need to be tracked not only for one individual store but for other stores in the state under the same license. For corporate recreational dispensaries with many different locations, this can get tricky. In fact, POS systems are essential technology to block what is known as “looping” This occurs when customers frequent many different locations to buy over their daily limit of 1 ounce. Recreational customers are only allowed to purchase 1 oz of cannabis daily, but if they frequent multiple shops, they can purchase as much cannabis as they want. The only risk is being stopped by a police officer who would confirm you had more than 1 oz on you in a car at one time, which is illegal. This often occurs with out-of-town tourists who want to purchase large amounts, but do not have time to wait days
to reach their limits. Sweet Leaf, a corporate dispensary, was shut down due to allowing customers to purchase over 28 grams per transaction, rather than one day. The state caught the dispensary and used them as an example for the industry; the company lost 26 licenses and was banned from the industry in Colorado. This is one of the consequences of not having a POS system that tracks daily sales among differing locations.

Budtender Consumption Practices

Budtenders enjoy a wide variety of products and show individual preferences for consumption based on time, participants involved, cost, and environment. Of the 33 I spoke with, nine said they smoked flower, 25 took edibles, and 16 reported that they smoked concentrates by dabbing, or by pen, for “stealth.” These categories were not mutually exclusive, and most chose either flower and edibles or flower and concentrates, as their preferred consumption methods. Budtenders often exchange insider tips for dealing with these tricky mechanisms and will discuss problems amongst themselves over informal breaks: “Stick it on your dash on a hot day to unclog,” one will say, while another will warn, “Avoid the glass recharges!”

Most budtenders have had at least one experience with obtaining a medical marijuana card, but only four of the 33 admitted to having a current medical license. The most noted reason for this was the upfront annual cost of obtaining a medical card and employee discounts on cannabis products. As front-line workers in the industry, they also are keen on understanding the medical/recreational dichotomy change in the industry, and many felt that the medical hard no longer holds enough value benefits. Amanda, a budtender in both the medical and recreational sales noted,

I got my med card once when the weed was way better. You have better quality and better deal and everything ‘cuz you sign over your six plants or whatever, and then by the time you get past probation, recreation was legal, so it just seemed across the board the same, so what’s the point of having medical if it’s not going to be as nice? Once weed went recreational, it went the same all across the board, so I didn’t renew my medical card.
Budtenders no longer see the benefits outweighing the cost of the red card, as it has lost its purchasing value after the switch to focus on recreational markets.

**Consumption at Work**

Smoking before and during work is a highly individualistic decision and also depends on what type of dispensary you work at. Some budtenders spoke about becoming a budtender solely for the reason that they would not have to worry about drug tests and would not get blamed for being high at work. Smaller medical dispensaries require employees to be multitasking, and thus mistakes can lead to large problems in terms of compliance. This makes smaller medical dispensaries are less welcome to the “employees asstoners narrative.”

The public message from management dictates how smoking on the job occurs. At big-box dispensaries like Dark Solar, the manager Tim was often inebriated. When asked about the policy, he told me: “We are all stoners. As long as you do it in your car or the bathroom, you’re fine.” Tim himself would often host break “sessions” in his car in the parking lot and would deliberately park in one specific spot off camera so it would not be picked up. Mistakes within the dispensary are chalked up to “being stoners,” which often becomes a catch-all for things that don’t go smoothly within the small shop. Medical dispensaries like Centennial Health have a stronger anti-clandestine smoking policy, as the manager did not want to lose his one license and fail compliance checks. In these situations, budtenders still regularly consume at work, but are more discreet, being careful whom they tell and using easier methods of public consumption.

Budtenders may become defensive about the stoner stereotype when it comes from an outside perspective despite using it within their micro-communities. One of the biggest misconceptions the general public has about budtending jobs that irritated industry workers were the fact that everyone thought they were high all day. Louie, the budtender, said, “That we are all just a bunch of lazy dropout stoners that ended up at a dispensary because it’s better than being in our parent’s basement.” Budtender Portia said: “People think we’re high all day have no idea what we’re talking about, always jokin’ that
we’re in the storage room ‘medicating.’ I don’t have time or money to be doing any of that.” Brian the budtender agreed by saying: “People think that you’re just a stupid pothead, you just got a job so you can smoke weed all day and not do anything.” Joe also noticed that people thought he was a “drug dealer and think that I work for gang members and sell drugs to kids.” Even though consumption is frequent at work, budtenders don’t want the negative stigma of being a stoner at work from outsiders, and often feel defensive when people belittle their cannabis use.

**Tolerance Breaks**

Limit breaks, or tolerance breaks as they are sometimes called, are necessary when one consumes consistently high levels of THC. In medical terms, the frequency of THC consumption over stimulates Cannabinoid type 1 receptor in the brain (Backes 2014). As this happens with other substances (food, sugar, caffeine, and hard drugs), the user continually needs to up the dosage, which causes overdoses and death in extreme cases. For cannabis users, one cannot “overdose,” and thus, the body just stops producing the “high” effect. In order to rehab your CB1 receptors, users need to give them a break so they can return to previous levels, which may take days to weeks. For many budtenders, their self-control and dependence on cannabis are too strong, especially being constantly surrounded by consumption. Budtenders can then either ingest higher doses of THC until they stop feeling high, quit for a short period to let receptors rest or, try and “cycle” their consumption.

Budtenders often try the first option of ingesting higher doses, which leads to hitting the “grass ceiling” with THC limits. In addition, the financial cost that it takes to consume high THC products frequently cancels out an average budtender’s monthly salary. Similar to drugs and alcohol, chronic consumption poses a significant financial risk to keep up with tolerance levels. Thus, the third option set out above can be employed, cycling to limit tolerance and also to curb costs, similar to the fallow system in agriculture. This technique was described to the author in early 2013 by a budtender and was mentioned in interviews by four other participants. The original budtender, Brandon, at The Firm dispensary, told me that he simply couldn’t stop consuming cannabis altogether. His dispensary held
after-hour tasting sessions in those days, and he wanted to be able to taste and understand the new product coming in. Instead of quitting altogether, he had devised a way where he could curb his high by switching consumption practices. He described how for two weeks he would smoke flower only, then he would only eat edibles for two weeks, and then on to concentrates for two-week, etc., as a cycling process. Another budtender Alida, told me that she does a similar cycling process but with flower only and changing up the inhalation technique. For example, at the start of the cycle, she might smoke out of a small one glass pipe for a few days, then slowly work her way up to larger and larger bowls before graduating to joints by the end of the month. By the time the next month started, she would begin again with small quantities, starting the cycle over.

Many budtenders who had only been smoking daily since moving to Colorado had steady consumption practices and did not complain of cannabis intolerance. This may be due to the fact that their body had not yet had enough time of continuous use to notice the effects, or they were disciplined in their amount of daily consumption. Lydia, the budtender, explained to me that she had set a budget for cannabis for the week, and she would only buy one cartridge for her pen. When she consumed all the oil in the cartridge, she would have to wait until the next week. She says that other perks, like friends and free joints at work, would help her get through the days when she ran out.

Dress Code

At Dark Solar, the use of “flair” (buttons and enamel pins) on the lanyards of budtender necklaces are an employee requirement. This is reminiscent of the ’90s and has made a strange comeback from its origins in 1990’s corporate America. Button pins have covered waitresses at casual restaurants for years as it was thought to help humanize service workers while in uniform in a fun and kitschy way (Morran 2015). That was until the 90’s cinema harnessed the dark comedy “Office Space,” a satire of work-life culture in America (Judge 1999). The movie has one notable scene where a boss is berating his server at “Chotchkie’s,” the fictionalized version of TGI Fridays. In the scene, Jennifer Aniston’s character is being belittled about her lack of flair “we need to talk about your flair...15 is the minimum, okay?” says
her boss (Judge 1999). After the movie came out, TGI Fridays employers were told that flair was over; they no longer enjoyed being so openly ridiculed in American media and ended up banning flair.

Flair has been making a comeback in recent days with younger populations that may not have been familiar with the 90’s trend of flair. Flair is being harnessed within the dispensary as a way to celebrate brand identity and give customers bits of information about their products. Dark Solar requires staff to wear a minimum of two pieces of flair, along with a hanging ID blue-light identifier. The flair is pinned to a branded lanyard that holds the worker’s support/key badge. This creates a triage of symbols for the customer to interact with showing name, compliancy, and brand in one accessory. Employees are not allowed to work within the store without having their lanyard physically on them, and this is often one of the most cited reasons for “calling out” of work, legitimate or not. Dark Solar sold flair to customers and employees alike, with enamel buttons of their house strains and their logo, which were surprisingly popular for a non-medicated product.

Dark Solar also had a very specific dress code on top of the badge accessory. Budtenders were required to wear collared shirts to put on a more business-casual appearance to cannabis and promote a more elevated impression of professionalism. Women were not allowed to wear short skirts or have any lingerie show, and T-shirts are banned for both sexes. Though the dress code is in place, with signs reminding budtenders, many do not follow it, including upper management.

**Risks and Occupational Hazards**

Risk is inherently built into the budtender position from the start, as its federal illegality and cash-based transactions open employees up to a plethora of potentially dangerous situations. From dealing with theft, to working around customers with serious medical problems, there are many occasions when the risk can follow employees’ homes after their shifts have ended. Dispensary employees need to be ready and primed for potential robberies while working. Panic buttons are in all rooms of any dispensary where a budtender interacts with customers so that in dangerous situations the authorities can be notified.
Thieves are almost exclusively looking for cash, not cannabis products, as informal actors know that dispensaries hold thousands of dollars in cash within their walls.

When Dark Solar expanded their brand to open more dispensaries, they had a fondness for buildings that had garage doors attached to them as this created a part of their brand identity. During the summer, the garage doors could be opened into the waiting room, adding to the bar or club-like atmosphere to increase recreational sales. Conversely, in the winter, the garage doors often put their stores at risk, as they could be easily broken into by people who knew the mechanisms, or by simply damaging them altogether.

Dark Solar experienced one of many robberies in the fall of 2020. While the shop was closed, at 4:20 in the morning (yes, culture extends to robberies as well), three people took a stolen car and tried to drive it through the closed garage door. The thieves managed to enter the outer waiting area but could not breach the “inner sanctum” that held the cash and products. Despite the risk, it took Dark Solar many weeks to fix the garage door mechanism, leaving the shop vulnerable to future break-ins until it was fixed.

In relation to thieves, budtenders need to be careful when divulging personal information. Knowing too much about employee’s personal lives and schedules could put them at undue risk. This was seen in the case of Maria, a front desk associate, who was born prematurely causing social and learning delays. Also, Maria’s vocal cords had been damaged, and she spoke more in a whispered voice. “Yeah, I technically can’t scream,” she said, “but we can’t tell anyone that, yeah?” She explained that she was worried about nefarious people using her personal information to their advantage. Maria looked at the broken garage door with a look of worry on her face. “They still haven’t fixed the door,” she said, rolling her eyes. It seemed especially concerning as Maria would often be the budtender receptionist that closed nights five days out of the week, putting her in a position where she would not be able to raise her voice to alert other employees without the use of the panic button. When confronted with concerns about her safety, she explained that she really loved her job, needed the extra money it brought in, and these were the only hours that worked with her schedule.
Risk can also occur when talking about on-the-job occupational hazards. In August of 2019, a group of budtenders met at the United Food and Commercial Workers Union in Wheat Ridge, Colorado, for a participatory workshop entitled “Workers’ Rights in the Cannabis Workplace” (Otañez 2019). Twelve participants registered for the program, four administrators, five presenters, and one camera filmed the event. It took place in a large ground-floor room filled with drinks and snacks. The event had various sessions, most notably an open discussion speaking about concerns the budtenders had while working in the industry. Repetitive hand motions, fungal species, and allergens dominated the conversation. Many of the employees spoke about strange white powders that covered shipments, problems with dust in cure rooms, and carpeted areas in packaging rooms. Not all participants worked in a dispensary. One woman worked on the financial side of the industry, dealing with the accounting headaches of working within a federally illegal business, while two young Caucasian guys were dispensary managers. All participants noted that employees were worried about whistleblowing, many fearing repercussions from their workplace and being fired from their positions. They expressed a lack of trust in the system and did not want to risk their livelihoods. It was already difficult enough. A representative who worked for the Workers Union posed the question to the group, “in what ways is the cannabis workplace different from other workplaces?” Slowly one guy raised his hand to start the conversation, “We…. we work with weed. We work with drugs” Another guy raised his hand, “ya know what? We are filmed all day long, who thinks about that?” “Me,” said another participant, “me too!” chimed in another.

As the conversation progressed, employees began to open up further about their personal lives. One participant said, “Even though it’s my job, it’s a very public thing, you know they recognize me at the grocery store, “Hey, you’re the guy that sells me weed!” The whole room erupted in laughter, with almost everyone nodding their head enthusiastically in agreement. Then the conversation turned to the fact that the industry is cash-based. One woman raised her hand, hesitated, and said, “I hide the fact that I work with cannabis. I am worried I may be a target. Has anyone had that fear?” others started to nod in agreement as they surveyed the room. “Yes, the moderator said, your right, some of your clients have
serious mental issues, some of them have PTSD or health issues. Has anyone not felt safe with a
customer? “the majority of the heads in the room moved up and down as participants looked at each other
with concerned faces.

Female budtenders may also take on an unequal portion of risk within the workplace with
unwanted attention or discrimination from male customers. Especially in medical dispensaries, patients
and customers can be dealing with a wide array of physical and mental illnesses leading to inappropriate
or dangerous behaviors. In times of unwanted attention, female employees can alert inappropriate
behavior by writing notes in the customer's profile that pops up when their ID is checked in the POS
system. Madeleine, the budtender, would often leave a note in the customer profile detailing her
awkward encounters with notes such as “customer touched budtender unwantedly, watch out!” or
“Banned at X location for inappropriate conversation!” Other employees within the dispensary seemed to
look out for Madeleine and treated her as a “younger sister” type. At the end of the night, the store
manager on duty would make sure that the entire staff walked around the store once as a group, both to
protect the women who were closing and walking to their cars alone and also as a precautionary measure
to make sure the perimeter of the store was secured. This added an extra layer of security for female
budtenders as a precaution for negative encounters with unstable customers. Female budtender Anna
summarized the majority of her interactions by saying, “The worst part about my job is the sketchy
creepers. They always kill the vibe at work. There’s a bunch of girls in here just chillin, havin a good time
sellin weed, and they be tryin to flirt with all of us. “

Female budtenders also complain about not being trusted or listened to as professional
budtenders. It is not uncommon for male customers to prefer male budtenders over female ones. As Alida
explained,

Guys don’t trust female budtenders. They come in and ask the male budtenders,
“what’s good, homie?” but they don’t ask me. Sometimes they’ll even lean over into
the next bay to ask the male budtender next to them instead of me. Literally, today, I
was selling Cookies and was like, “this shit is sick, it’s top shelf,” but the dude didn’t
want any and ended up getting some cheap shit. Then he overheard a guy budtender
say to another customer, “Cookies is dank,” and when he heard that, he said, “lemme
grab an eighth of the Ghost Train too” like, “Oh… now you want that… I see!” Ugh, that shit is so annoying. Didn’t tip me either, that asshole.

This shows how women, who are supposedly overrepresented in the cannabis industry, are not always valued the same as male budtenders in the same positions (McVey 2019).

Finance

**Wages, Payments, and Benefits**

Currently, there are 35,593 cannabis jobs just in the state of Colorado, with around 4,000 positions added in 2020 alone (Leafly Jobs Report 2021). Wages of budtenders have stayed consistent with other retail or service industry positions, often hovering slightly above minimum wage. In 2015, an average medical budtender would be making $8-$11 per hour. In 2020, the average was $13-15 per hour. The low wage of the cannabis budtender is often covered up due to its popularity. As Adams noted, “There is a part of me now that wonders whether selling weed isn’t just the newest dead-end job…sadly, these low-level positions are the new minimum wage jobs of tomorrow…Considering the reality of the overall job market in key legal states, selling weed is not likely to help people gain much more financial security than waiting tables” (Adams 2018). In Denver especially, with minimum wage not matching a living wage within the city, budtenders rely on tips and benefits to make ends meet.

Some budtenders know this is going into the industry and claim that they are doing the low-wage labor to gain experience for opportunities down the road. Budtender migrants often wait until their states begin to legalize cannabis, thinking they will have a market advantage once they move back. Budtender Jeff likened the job to other public service jobs by saying: “Don’t get a job because of the paycheck, get it for the experience and education. If you’re not doing it for those reasons, you’re fucking up. Similar to a firefighter, cop, it’s the experience.” Some budtenders have made the connection between a lack of formal barriers into the budtender position and the lack of pay. Tyrell reiterated while laughing, “you don’t make no money at no mutha fuckin’ dispensary, get the fuck outta here! And I’m going to tell you why, what
did you have to do to qualify you to work at a dispensary?” Here, Tyrell made the correlation between income and qualifications, essentially bringing to light that almost anyone can become a budtender.

Many employees in the industry are paid directly in cash, causing issues with mortgages and formal banking. Larger corporate dispensaries have hired third-party billing companies that work only with the cannabis industry. Budtender Jeff noted he only got paid in cash and regretted it: “When you’re working, be sure to save all your cash money, and that’s coming from me… I didn’t get any paychecks from any weed jobs, just straight cash, and it went in my hand and right back out within the same dispensary.” Jeff’s experience is indicative of how many budtenders spend their money on product within their shops or others, especially when they are paid in cash, which makes it more difficult for them to use self-control.

**Tips**

Tips, how to get them, and how much, dominated a large portion of budtender conversations. Tips are often handled differently by different dispensaries and often depend on what type of incentive and experience the company is looking to uphold within its internal business structure. Some dispensaries pool tips together and split them with all members of the shift team. Other dispensaries have individual jars for each budtender that are taken home by only that one individual after their shift. Other dispensaries have decided to prohibit tipping in the dispensary altogether. Tips for budtenders are taxed as income, along with any type of performance-based incentives. While working, a new email had come in that said since the gift cards with the performance incentives were considered income, they would need to be taxed going forward. The full switch had made it so that the budtenders were getting taxed on three levels; once for the tips, once for their hourly wage, and again for their product incentive wins.

Within Centennial Health, the medical dispensary, all tips were combined and shared according to store policy. Individual interactions were important for budtenders but did not carry the individual responsibility of earning tips just on your service alone. Furthermore, pooled tips were not counted as income, and remained tax-free for employees. At the end of a shift, the nightly ritual would be to sit
together and count the tips. Tips are often touted as a benefit of the position, and an excuse for low hourly wages, but for many, tips were income they used for daily food purchases. Like in other service industries, tips are not socially mandated or calculated at a customary rate of 10-20 percent. Budtender tips usually turn out less than projected and rarely amounted to more than $100 a week on an average for a 40+ hour job.

Some dispensaries try and entice new budtenders by allowing them to collect their own tips from personal jars, incentivizing the customer service, commission-based wage structure, thus increasing selling power. At Dark Solar, tips were individually counted, and a certain level of competition in tips was cultivated. Many complained about not getting any tip; others wondered why one person received more than others. Some budtenders used tips as a sort of social capital over other budtenders. Budtenders would experiment with different tactics to get tips and share (or keep) the information with others. Some of the most widely used tactics spoken about where the use of friendly monikers like “baby” and “sweetie,” while other female budtenders would physically touch their customers on the shoulder or arm to forge “connections.” It was often the same budtenders who used overtly sexual tactics that complained about not receiving tips. In fact, the most tipped budtender at Dark Solar was the oldest, whose attitude was often strictly business and tried to get customers through as quickly as possible.

One particularly exciting instance at Dark Solar was when the shop received a call from corporate regarding a VIP client coming into the shop. It was a well-known basketball player turned coach from out of town who was stopping into the location to buy product. “Aren’t you excited”? I asked the budtenders. “Not really,” one said as a conversation ensued about how budtenders hate VIP clients because they rarely tip. Later in the day, the VIP client hobbled out of his elite black pickup truck into the back budroom. After spending 15 minutes inside, he left with a large bag of products. When budtender Helen came to tell us about her experience, she exclaimed: “Typical VIP client, yeah, I sold him 500$ worth of product, and he didn’t tip me even one dollar!” she said angrily.

Dark Solar has a special way of counting tips as well. As a corporate recreational dispensary, budtender taxes are taxed by the shop and counted by managers. Managers count larger bill tips ($5, $10,
$20) as only single one-dollar bills to decrease the amount of taxes that the employee will need to pay from their actual paycheck. Therefore, if a budtender brings in a $10 bill, a $5 dollar bill, and a single, the manager will only officially report $3, not $16, to the billing company. This tactic allows dispensary managers to be seen as “flexible” and “caring” by budtenders as they continue to pay only minimum wage hourly rates.

**Commission Based Sales**

Many dispensaries do not have any form of commission-based sales incorporated into their business as there has been no lack of new employees wanting to break into a job in a dispensary. However, large corporate dispensaries have started to introduce commission-based sales as a tactic for competition and rank among their different locations. Budtenders are given a choice to opt into a commission-dependent budtender position, or they could choose to get paid $1 more per hour according to their hiring contract. Corporate employees will send a list of products that are included in the commission-based sales for the month. Each product would have a different amount associated with it if a budtender sold that specific item. For example, if a budtender sold Kudu Sativa Chocolates in the month of November, the budtender would receive 50 cents for each item sold. There were also competitions for the most units sold, so if a budtender sold more Kudu Sativa Chocolates than any other budtender at any location, they would also win a cash gift card of $50-$100.

Commission sales dramatically change the budtender-customer relationship in recreational sales. The focus switches from the best product for the customer, to the best product for the budtender at that time to sell. The most successful commission sales budtenders did whatever was necessary to make a sale. The assistant manager Elizabeth even helped coach new budtenders on the job on how to get better commission sales:

> Listen to what I say, “You thinking about buying that? Yeah! Absolutely that gets me sooo high, it’s so sweet! Sativa? Sure absolutely the best” See what I did ‘der, I try an sell them dem ones that’s gonna make me the best money, ya know what I’m sayin? I’m selling you the one that makes me $200 in gift cards or 50 cents a unit!
That's the one you’re getting, but it’s not the cheapest! Sometimes it gets kind of awkward, like, “what gummies you got?” “These for $18” “What is the cheapest?” “These for $11” “Why didn’t you tell me that to begin with?” But hey, I mean, that’s the game!” (With hands up) You be gettin the ones I get paid for!

The highest-earning budtender at Dark Solar was Lydia. She had graduated high school but described herself as having a lack of focus and was more concentrated on the party lifestyle after high school. She had come into the industry after making $18 an hour as a secretary at a local doctor’s office and was one of the oldest budtenders working in the dispensary at the age of 31. She said that her lowest tip total in one day was $25, but she was generally bringing in around $40 in addition to her hourly wages and commission sales. Commission sales were paid out in incentive gift cards, which accumulated anywhere from $50-$300 in extra income per month. Her highest average was $500 in one month due to her winning multiple commission incentives. The competitive nature of commission-based sales created friction among other budtenders in the shop. Firstly, her success in sales created her to be separate from the other budtenders who wondered how she made so many commission sales. This led other budtenders to monitor her movements and actions, to try and find her “tricks of the trade.”

Dark Solar operates with a waiting room, budroom, inventory framework, so budtenders need to come back into the waiting room to chaperone clients into the budroom. This is theoretically done by creating a budtender queue order, so on slow days, every budtender gets an equal among of customers. When the waiting room is remarkably busy and customers are quickly pushed through the store, the order gets mixed up and budtenders forget who comes next. This was the sweet spot where some budtenders would take advantage of the lack of order and try and pick which customers they thought would be easier to sell to, or were more likely to give a tip.

Other budtenders noticed that in times of confusion, Lydia would often pick her customers based on ethnicity and gender, as her experience dictated that there would be a better chance of receiving tips based on her perceived judgments of that customer's position in society. This created a discussion within
the shop among other budtenders about her perceived racism and sexism. The conversation unfolded between budtenders as follows:

“She is racist! She took the white guy instead of the black guy! Didn’t you see that?”

“No, I don’t think it's racism. She wears a Black Lives Matter mask, I know she isn’t racist. She loves black guys!”

“I think it’s just about how rich they are. It’s not about their race.”

“I don’t think she is doing it on purpose guys, no matter what, we are all stoners, and we all get confused.”

This conversation among budtenders is indicative of the types of conversations that link intersectional discrimination with ‘valuable’ customers. Some budtenders did not recognize her behavior as discrimination; some thought it was racism, while others pointed to classism. None of the budtenders mentioned or picked up on the intersectional nature of social discrimination in society as a possible reason for her actions.

**Taxes**

For cannabis employees, taxes on their income further put them at a disadvantage compared to other positions in a federally legal industry. At Dark Solar, employees are taxed on their hourly wages, tips, commission sales, and any gift cards that they “win” for the month. Employees are also taxed for any product they buy from their own shops as well. Budtender Phillip remarked, “We’re already addicted to it. We work here for god’s sake. You don’t have to add tax to it.” Wage taxation for industry employees often takes away the few dollars that would allow them to make ends meet. Employees also mention that they don’t fully understand why they are being taxed, especially when recreational sales bring in billions of dollars for the state that cannabis employees never see. Amanda noted, “The taxes are crazy, and what do they use the taxes for, do you know? They make so much money off it.”

The state also taxes products differ according to the county, so the taxation in Denver is different from its neighboring suburb of Aurora. This causes an extra level of headaches for budtenders who work
with product pricing and updating online menus. At Dark Solar, all locations needed to offer the same “out the door” price at any location, regardless of what county the store was in. This technically meant that specific products were more or less expensive in between other counties, with the difference in price being made up for in the county taxes. Due to this discrepancy, budtenders were required constant updating of online systems, with different priced products in stores, even though some locations may have been a mile or less away from each other. With over 300 products at any one time in inventory, the confusion of price and taxes often became extra work that was pushed onto the busy schedule of budtenders.

Complaining about tax from consumers to a budtender is considered a major faux pas in the industry. Since neither the dispensaries nor the budtenders have anything to do with the regulation of tax amounts, this is often one of the most frustrating complaints to hear from customers. The truth is, customers, especially cannabis tourists or first-time buyers, are not informed about the exuberantly high amount of taxes, and to hear a 10 percent or 15 percent tax on top of the state’s price often gives customers receipt shock after the fact. Common complaints from customers sound like, “What? I thought it was $10 a gram, why do I have to pay 15%?” or, “But the price says $20 eighths right there on the menu!” Many budtenders feel that this type of response or complaint is unwarranted to do the “privilege” of being able to buy legal cannabis at all. Alice’s response was, “why don’t you go over to Walmart, buy a shirt, and then head to customer service and complain about the tax on it, see how that goes.” Phillip similarly mentioned, “you don’t complain at a liquor store, why come here and complain, c’mon man, don’t be playin’ me like that? I mean, it's legal weed!”

Dispensaries create this confusion on purpose through advertising competitions and push the customer service predicaments onto the budtenders. Dispensaries may advertise cannabis with lower prices to make it seem like they have competitive pricing, but when looking closer, one will see the fine print “*before tax.*” First-time consumers are often unaware of the abnormally large tax rates that weigh down the cost of cannabis. Customers will enter a store lured in by the low prices of cannabis, only to realize that they have only budgeted for the before-tax price, often resulting in lower quantities, or the
dreaded “walk of shame” back to the ATM as a long line of waiting customers give an unapproving glare. Consequently, the dispensary creates advertising techniques that create negative experiences for consumers and leave budtenders to deal with the repercussions.

**Product Discounts for Employees**

Many budtenders may not even have enough purchasing power to shop for cannabis at the stores in which they work at. Budtenders cannot afford to keep up with their consumption needs due to the cost. Budtenders often think that their employee discounts cover their lower-than-average hourly wages. Discounts on products for personal consumption are a focus for budtenders since many claim the perks of the job are what attracted them to the position. Some dispensaries offer discounts on cannabis products, while others do not.

Centennial Health, the medical dispensary, did not give discounts on cannabis products to employees but were given discounts on other items in the shop such as pipes, papers, and batteries. The store manager defended this decision by saying any extra profits were going into building the brand and the business, which would eventually “trickle-down” to the employees as the business grew. Mick, a medical budtender, noted: “Companies kinda lead the employees to believe that because they aren’t getting any tax breaks or anything, then they are forced to pay their workers less, but I mean, we all know the owner is making more than a million a year.” This often leads to resentment from budtenders who may look for gaps in compliance to illegally obtain cheaper product under the table. If budtenders wanted to purchase product from the shop, they would have to have another budtender, not a manager necessarily, check them out of their own account. This created further opportunities to be dishonest about the amount and prices of products they were purchasing.

Recreational dispensaries are much more open to giving employee discounts because of their larger profit margins. Dark Solar created an extremely intricate system of discounts for personnel that consisted of a three-page rule sheet with guidelines per item, per position, per market. For discounts to be applied, budtenders would need to be checked out by the manager on duty to make sure the transaction
was sufficiently witnessed, and the correct tier of discount was applied. Dark Solar also kept employees happy by offering them one free pre-rolled joint a week.

Even purchasing a red card does not help much in terms of out the door savings for budtenders looking to save on personal use of cannabis. When budtenders are also medical card owners, this discount process can get tricky rather quickly. Due to the tax difference, medical and recreational products are given different discount rates within the dispensary. After doing the price crunches on the medical vs. recreation side at Dark Solar, the out the door price for medical cannabis only comes to $1.50 cheaper than the recreational market for an ounce of flower. Therefore, it may not be worth going through the extra step and cost to obtain a red card: the exception to this rule is with edibles, as high THC milligram products do not exist in the recreational market.

The fieldwork journal presented below expands on the researcher's personal experience when transitioning from legal positions in industry to il/legal ones, and the epiphanies that come when re-orienting oneself into a new “professional” environment.

Fieldwork Journal 2/15/2017: Working as a budtender in the cannabis industry was a real personal shock for me the first time around. I had just come out of a rigorous academic environment and then directly thrown into a semi-legal workplace. Switching from Turnitin to Turn-over-the-cash-for-drugs seemed to be a bigger leap than I had imagined. Even with the cameras constantly on us, sleight of hand on product and cash were easy to spot if you knew how to watch people, like say, an anthropologist might. The uneasy feeling of going to work every day thinking we might be robbed or raided was something I had yet to experience, as it was clear that working in a dispensary was not like smoking pot at summer camp anymore - it was bullet proof glass and mounted ceiling cameras - it was knowing the legal limits and the loopholes to those limits - It was now rumorining of raids and old ladies walking into the night with carpet bags of cash - it was knowing when to shut your mouth...

Working in the medical dispensary, we would get deliveries of giant translucent garbage bags full of cannabis. Every morning we would take the giant bags from the safe in the basement and store them upstairs. Bags would be stuffed in crevices in the staff bathroom (which we used) or in unused cabinets in the budroom. When the jars in our budroom ran low, we would reach our bare hand down into the bag and take handfuls out to replenish the jar. The first time I did this my entire arm turned bright red, hives started to appear, and my whole arm started to uncontrollably itch. “oh yeah, it’s a weed huh? ” I said to myself, wait, “I’m allergic to weeds!” I would remember with a flashback of the dermatologist pricking me for my last allergy test.
Though it is a “weed,” I had never really put the two together. They were in different conceptual categories in my mind though they shared the exact same name and properties.

This fieldwork journal entry is indicative of many first-time budtenders who enter into the market from other highly managed industries. It may come as a shock for many to fully realize the extent of the daily goings-on that takes place within a dispensary and to adapt to the quasi- legality of the job title. Industry workers assume that management and owners are complying with state guidelines, and when they are told to do something unusual, they often take on the personal risk in terms of illegality, health, and general safety of the exchange rather than the dispensary owners themselves. This also extends to what dispensary owners divulge in terms of chemicals, pesticides, and other harmful toxins that budtenders come in bodily contact with. Industry workers have complained about breathing problems, skin issues, and other health problems stemming from constant bodily contact with cannabis in various forms. Budtenders are often left out of the conversation when it comes to their own personal health and safety in relation to working with agricultural products like cannabis.

**Housing**

Budtenders live in a variety of housing options in and around the Denver metro area. Since many budtenders have come from out of state, financial resources such as family and friends are often not available. Also, due to the relatively young age of most budtenders, housing is often the cheapest one they can find. Considering the Denver housing market is one of the most expensive and scarce in the country, this is easier said than done. In fact, Colorado ranks 48 out of 50 for housing affordability, being surpassed only by California and Hawaii as of 2018 (Council for Community and Economic Research 2018). Due to the high cost of living, lack of affordable housing, and low wages, the majority of budtenders are really financially struggling to make ends meet.
Clara, a 22-year-old high school graduate with four kids, filed for Section 8 housing in Denver to approve her living standards for her children. She loved working at the dispensary as she was a heavy cannabis user throughout her life, including her four pregnancies. She did not think the cannabis use damaged her children in-utero but did notice they had some symptoms of ADHD. Clara detailed to me the circumstances in which she left her position at the dispensary and opened up about the struggles that her family was going through. She felt that the dispensary job sometimes caused more financial problems than it solved, as childcare costs were not affordable when both she and her husband were at work. When last-minute shifts changed between the two, one of them would need to call out to take care of the children. This ultimately led to Clara’s termination at the dispensary. After losing her job at the dispensary, she was forced to move out of her sectioned housing altogether, leaving her family homeless. Eventually, she decided to take her family back home to the Midwest, where she had extended family support to help her figure out a more permanent solution before trying to move back to Colorado permanently.

Some budtenders choose to live in small single-person housing in urban areas. These often consisted of older buildings in central Denver that were either rented by the room or taken on by a few friends for a yearly lease. Some singles choose to live with roommates or other budtenders that they know in their social circles or from work. This can often help financially by pooling their economic power to secure more housing options. Budtenders Tim and Martin, friends and also co-managers at Dark Solar, decided to move in together to save money. They also chose to leave the Denver area for a rural suburb where they could find much more affordable housing despite the long commute.

Sam, the budtender, opted for the renting-a-room strategy. She looked online and found a young family in a nearby suburb of Denver who was renting out their unfinished basement to make some extra money. Though the unfinished basement was a slab of concrete with no personal bathroom (she had to go upstairs), lights, or heating, the low price of $600 a month outweighed the negatives for her. Sam eventually had to move out due to the family’s strict rules that she could not consume cannabis inside the
of the five single mothers that were interviewed, three of them lived with family members as they could not afford to be out on their own. Issues of childcare and trust were among the two reasons why female budtenders continued to live with their families. Unfortunately, all the females interviewed expressed negative sentiments about this and wanted to be independent as soon as they were financially able. Anna, a budtender with a four-year-old daughter, explained her difficult home situation. Her daughter had just started school, and she was in a custody battle with her “baby daddy,” which both drained her resources. She was forced to live with her stepfather and his friend, who suffered from military PTSD. She told me her living situation was less than ideal as her stepfather’s friend would often become erratic. She expressed wanting to leave the situation for the safety of her child, but her low wages and financial obligations left her in a poverty trap.

Budtenders who are in committed relationships have a financial advantage over the singletons as their partners often worked outside the industry-leading to more stability within the household. Budtenders with partners noted that this often-helped financial stresses, especially when it came to formal forms of savings such as retirement funds and health care benefits.

**Typologies of the Cannabis Consumers According to Budtenders**

Since budtenders see such a large volume of customers daily, they often quickly need to identify the customers’ needs in the first few minutes of meeting them and then proceed with what they think that typology of customer might want. First-time customers often take a lot more one-on-one coaching than other consumers and are either hated or loved by their respective budtenders. One thing that most budtenders can agree on is that first-timers rarely tip. Most first-timers come from neighboring states, as many curious local customers had already been into a shop since legalization. Therefore, for many budtenders, first-timers are often synonymous with tourists. There were many common themes about similar experiences between tourists and budtenders. This section aims to give the reader guidelines for
interacting with a budtender within a dispensary for the first time and the most common issues that arise between budtender first-timer interactions.

Budtenders often complained about tourist’s excitement for their first “cannabis experience,” as the amount of time spent with the customer often does not equate to the amount of money they will make from the transaction. With wait times for customers in queues, budtenders are pressured to get through as many customers as possible, which also increases their tips. This can be a problem as tourists and first-timers want the “full cannabis dispensary experience,” which might resemble a tour or educational consultation rather than a retail purchase experience. First-timers often want to get to know the cannabis products as a purchasing experience rather than simply a transaction. Cannabis tourists love to explore the different types of flower, after a long explanation of what “flower” means. First-time customers will then go through all the top strain and private reserve strain shelves (higher priced cannabis product strains) and will often end up choosing a small amount of a lower shelf strain. These tourists want to touch, smell, and look at all the products for their own education, as well as used as cultural capital gained from the experience when it is told in story-form when they return home.

Due to time management, it is not feasible to go through every product to see what looks “good” for the customer. Anna explained, “I’ve been a service worker before, so I understand I’m on your time, but I can’t spend an hour showing you every single thing. For fuck’s sake, it’s called the internet!” Some consumers go too far and take small pieces of cannabis with their fingers from the jar and press it up into their nose. Some customers have dirty hands and dirty faces. Tyrell recalled that he “could see one of the guy’s nose hairs touch the bud, and then he put it back in the jar.” This also leads to health and safety concerns, with bodily fluids/fingers coming in contact with a consumable product. The story of the experience and the ability to describe the different smells, looks, and tastes, often garner prestige and admiration from cannabis friends back home.

Budtenders are often annoyed by first-timers who have done little research about the industry and products because it takes valuable time to educate customers and tourists from all over the nation during their daily shifts. Budtenders are very picky about the timing of customers and the time they take in
picking out the product within the shop. By far, the most common response to “what do you want” is often “what is good.” At this point, a budtender has a few ways of handling this question. First, budtenders often respond with annoyance, “everything is good” or the ironically toned, “it’s all weed, it’s all good.” Another avenue of response is to recommend not what is actually “good,” but what is going to make the budtender the most amount of money in sales commissions, or what managers are looking to sell to the customer. For budtenders that make a large commission, first-timer tourists can also provide an opportunity lead to good sales as Elizabeth notes, “they don’t know what’s going on. They are excited and cheerful, and easy to sell to.” If someone is especially annoying or rude to their budtender, they might offer you the lowest quality product since they assume the customer probably will not know the difference regardless. Budtenders know that with the high levels of THC, for cannabis tourists or fist-timers, everything will hit them, and they will get high regardless of the smaller amounts of THC, or less superior flower.

The most cited reason for preferring not to deal with first-timers was their lack of tip experience. Since tourists are unfamiliar with the system, they often do not tip. The various levels of being corralled through the dispensary only add to the confusion- “who should I tip? Do I tip the same amounts to everyone? Is it necessary?” Furthermore, since cannabis tourists will most likely not return to the same shop (they might shop around for other strains and products elsewhere), customers don’t feel the need to reciprocate a tip transaction because they no longer need the budtender, nor need to foster a relationship for the future.

Below is a fieldwork journal excerpt that delves into the intricacies of the insider-outsider categories when it comes to the relationship between cannabis tourists and budtenders. Despite the researcher being a budtender herself and being born and raised in Colorado, she is still considered a cannabis tourist outside of Denver. Smaller towns outside of Denver may feel pressured to create tourist experiences and new commodities to attract tourists to visit. This is one example of how dispensaries outside of the capital city of Denver use advertisements and media to pull tourists into smaller markets by creating unusual products and experiences.
Fieldwork Journal 8/20/2020: Pueblo is the fourth largest city in Colorado outside the Denver metro area and consists of rolling grassy hills and farmland. Once a small historic town, Pueblo has reached new heights in the cannabis industry as it is one of the few places where you can grow outdoors. Since I have yet to actually explore this place myself, I have decided to make the five-hour round trip to check out something I recently saw in the news, the first cannabis vending machine.

The air in Pueblo is dry and hot—any sweat that accumulates immediately evaporates off into the air as I follow the GPS to the location. “Am I in the right place?” I ask myself. The double-wide white trailer does not match the humongous glitzy red sign on the highway. The white trailer is set on the backside of an old baseball diamond-nestled around the bend of a curvy local road and tucked into a sort of forgotten plot of land. There are no cars outside, no long wait time, no nothing. I walk in cautiously and see the security guard in the waiting room, bored and playing on his phone. The waiting room looks similar to many small-scale dispensaries—an old couch, a wooden table with magazines, stickers, and business cards. “Hi! I drove all the way down here from Denver to get a look at this vending machine you got here! Can I take a picture of it?” I say over-enthusiastically. He looks suspicious at this point—“Uhm, I don’t know if you can do that. You’ll have to ask one of the guys inside,” he tells me. At this point, I hand him my ID, he checks it, and I head back into the budroom.

The budroom is smaller than usual, with only two to three budtender stalls. The look is along the lines of a “mom and pop” shop mixed with the college dorm room, a style reminiscent of the early stages of legalization before the “big boxes” arrived with the streamlined, clean, and comfortable versions. A shaggy-haired man in his early twenties motions me to come over, with another older guy to his left unloading boxes and working on the inventory under the counter. I try and start a conversation with him by saying, “Hi! I am a doctoral student researching budtenders in Colorado,” but it is clear that my introduction is already too formal and domineering and has put him off. He seems anxious now, “sorry about all the mess back here,” as he points to the boxes stacked behind the counter, “we just got in a shipment.” I try and come back with my own narrative to put him more at ease, switching to my deep ‘bro-voice.’ “No worries, man, I get you, I was a budtender too, man.” For some reason, my use of the term “man” mixed with a slight head nod in the upwards direction makes me feel younger and cooler than I actually am. Through fieldwork, I have noticed that the gendered use of “man” along with a deeper voice seems to make my identity more nongendered and thus more approachable. This tactic also seems to work on my young budtender here as his expression immediately softens, and our conversation starts to open up and become less formal.

We talk about the differences between Denver dispensaries and Pueblo dispensaries, how many locations Strawberry Fields has, and the plethora of outdoor grows. This leads us into a discussion of “insider vs. outsiders,” or in this case, “locals vs. tourists.” He tells me about the border city of Trinidad, which I was familiar with as it is the “sex change capital of the world” but had never realized it held such cannabis significance. I quickly realize that I am a tourist in his categorizations of local vs. tourist, which becomes more apparent since he tells me I don’t qualify for a “local discount” …nor a budtender one.
After buying a small quarter of middle shelf flower, I ask if I can see and take a picture of the vending machine I had been hearing so much about. “It’s actually right behind you, and it’s not working right now,” he said, “but I can take your picture with it for sure!” I turn around to see a large bulky red box behind me in the corner of the small budroom. It has one small hole with what I can only describe as a peeping tom camera set in the back somewhere. There is another hole cut out beneath to fit a computer touch screen that lets customers manually enter in their own orders. By all accounts, I am disappointed and underwhelmed, the vending machine looks more like a college project than a workable vending machine. “uh, so when is it going to be working?” I ask, “not sure, they are trying to work out the kinks, how about that picture? Get in there! Take a selfie and show your friends, you want me to take it?” “oh no, it’s not that kinda picture,” I say as I snap a few pics, tip him three bucks, and leave to make the three-hour trip back home.

This fieldnote points to the intricate socio-cultural rules and etiquette that surround the cannabis buying experience. Being apart of one in-group (budtender) does not necessarily put you within specific dispensaries uniquely defined in-group category. As seen here, even though both people are budtenders in Colorado, one is considered an outsider as they do not live in the local community of Pueblo. The other participant tries to make a connection with the budtender on the terms of their shared experience in the same profession but is seen as an intrastate tourist, rather than a local, as they come from the “big city” of Denver. This results in a cultural miscommunication in regard to selfie-taking. The budtender assumes it is for tourism purposes as cultural capital to post on social media, while the researcher is there for its research purposes within the industry. The two participants have different identity categories and domains for interpreting interactions with people.

Intersectionality of perceived demographics of the researcher when conducting fieldwork is also briefly touched upon, as female researchers often need to adapt and change their demeanor according to the participant in which they are speaking. Here the researcher lowered her voice and used focal language to indicate that they were also part of their sub-cultural group identity. This tactic is thought to have made a connection and ease with the
subject, but at the end of the encounter, she is still considered an outsider by her professional peer.

This passage also shows how dispensaries try and differentiate themselves from the market by attracting media attention for products that may or may not exist, or are prototypes of possible future methods of dispensing cannabis to consumers. Here, the dispensary vending machine was a popular topic on news media platforms as the “first cannabis vending machine,” but the reality of the vending machine was much different than advertised. The vending machine was used as a symbolic object of imagined future possibilities of cannabis consumption for tourists rather than a working model of technological design.

Local and Global Customers

Locals often view budtenders as friendly acquaintances, like their namesake of bartenders. Locals who visit the shop daily may want to catch up on last weekend’s shenanigans, relationship troubles, or new cannabis news. In these instances, it is advantageous for both the budtender and the customer to forge a mutually beneficial relationship, budtenders will give them insider information on products, and the customers will tip them for “taking care” of them. For the singletons, local customers may also turn into actual friends out of the shop, as many budtenders meet their partners while working. In smaller communities outside of Denver, locals may even get their discount since they are the minority of customers within the shop. This is especially true for dispensaries built along major interstate highways like Trinidad and Pueblo, where locals receive a 10 percent discount on flower within the dispensary.

Not all locals are welcomed. Due to the locations of many dispensaries in low-income areas, locations may attract the occasional homeless individual. Dark Solar, for example, had a local homeless man who was treated differently depending on the budtender on duty. The homeless man was in his 50’s and was completely non-verbal. He would often shuffle in, point to the front bathroom, stay inside for a period of 15-30 minutes, and then leave again without purchasing anything. Some budtenders surmised he
might be doing drugs, though a discussion ensued about not finding needles or paraphernalia. Others just joked that he probably needed to defecate and had seen where his pod was located a few blocks away. After one incident where the homeless man did make somewhat of a mess with loose toilet paper and such within the bathroom, a female budtender manager chased him down and made him return to clean it. Since budtenders are also required to clean the shop before and after store hours, these acts of compassion that lead to more work were often not taken kindly.

At Dark Solar, a sizable number of foreign passports entered the doors as recreational customers, an occurrence that does not happen at medical dispensaries due to residency barriers. These were almost always from South or Central American countries. Though many had yet to learn English, they had the ritual memorized of how to enter a dispensary: Show ID, wait for someone to come out of the door to get them and take them back, hand over money, leave. The store had multiple Spanish-speaking budtenders that could have easily helped them in the process. However, this did not always go according to plan. Alex, a Hispanic budtender in his early twenties, preferred not to take these customers and would often “give” the Spanish-speaking customers to other budtenders. Though he was of Hispanic origin, he admitted to me in our interview that he did not like these customers and sometimes lied about speaking Spanish. Sometimes he pretended to not speak Spanish and all, or only reply in English. When pressed why he said he did not want to deal with them. It was clear that though they spoke the same language, he did not consider them part of his cultural group, and often was somewhat perturbed or embarrassed by their behavior as he assumed they were middlemen for the black market.

Customers by Age

Budtenders may often refer to a customer’s age in their difficulty dealing with them. Older customers may come in with predisposed ideas of what cannabis was in “their time.” Their antiquated ideologies and conceptual framing of cannabis can be difficult for budtenders to navigate. Many older people who come into the shop are looking to budtenders to teach them about what they need, they prefer the verbal conversation rather than getting online into “the deep throws of the interwebs.” This can lead to
the extended time needed with the customer, not to mention many questions regarding other health conditions, some of which the budtender may have never heard of.

Likewise, younger customers, especially medical customers who are under 21, can cause friction within the dispensary as well. While working at Centennial Health, younger customers (ages 18-21) who carried red cards were very frequent. Younger patients would often visit the dispensary before or after their work shifts from their other jobs and many worked in various levels of the food and hospitality industry. In one case, an 18-year-old patient would come in regularly every week before his shift to buy exceptionally large amounts of cannabis with his extended plant count red card. One day he had been especially short-tempered with a new employee at the shop. He was frustrated with her lack of sufficiently picking out the “best” buds and started raising his voice: “Do you even know who I am?” he shouted. “Get on your little computer right now,” he said, “check out how much money I’ve spent in here this month, this year!” The budtender looked at the computer and looked back at him. “Yes, I see here you have spent around $6,000 just here at this dispensary this month, I can see, this, and the IRS can see this too. The last time I checked, you worked as a line cook at Village Inn.” This was during a time when the IRS was chasing down medical consumers who were purchasing high levels of cannabis in cash that was well over their income, causing taxation problems and indicated black market sales. The budtender revealed she frequently used this scare tactic to calm down overly demanding customers who had become entitled due to the value managers put on their large weekly sales.

Another frequently cited negative of younger customers is that they are disproportionately the same customers who are looking for “exact” products. This could be due to word of mouth or advertising campaigns set for that target age group. Younger customers were often less open to experimenting with similar products, leaving them with the nickname “I Only” customers. For example, a customer may come into the shop and ask for a specific strain of cannabis, if the budtender says we don’t have that, but we have something with similar properties, they will reply with “Nah, I only smoke Kush” or “I only fuck with purps” this doesn’t leave room for the budtender to go in terms of sales and thus are not favorable customers to service. This is especially true when budtenders have inside information about
how products are labeled in the shop. One budtender admitted that in her shop, budtenders would put the same strain of cannabis in two different jars and make up names and testing numbers. This gave the illusion of a larger variety of flower products when inventory is lower than expected.

**Rude Customers and Complainers**

Anyone that has worked in retail or the service industry knows that customers complain. It is the budtender's job to come up with reasonable explanations for complaints and try and make their experience as positive as possible. However, due to the fact the industry is new, and things change so quickly, budtenders and dispensary managers are often left to their own devices as the front line of customer service.

For some dispensaries looking to capitalize on the tourist market via online reviews, free joints or other small discounts are often advertised to get customers in the door and to boost their ratings. Equally important, negative online reviews can account for a large portion of missed profits, especially if the dispensary caters to the out-of-town market. When a negative review surfaces online, a budtender will add a note into the customer's profile flagging them as a negative reviewer and is often asked to get a manager on duty to see what they can do to retract the negative review. However, this does not always get handled properly. While talking to a recreational budtender at Avalanche Dispensary, she gave insight as to how negative online reviews are handled in the store. “When I see a note in their file that says they left a negative review, and a manager isn’t around to handle it, I usually just say, “Hey, I need to run a price check on this real quick,” and I pop in the back and exchange it for some shit trim weed, then I come back and say “great, enjoy your weed! It’s like, you already don’t like us, why are you coming back?”

Dispensaries have the power to ban especially rude customers from their store. Corporate dispensaries also have the choice to ban customers from specific stores, but not all locations. At Dark Solar, one especially eccentric customer was banned for inappropriate behavior towards a budtender at one location but was allowed as a customer to others. This allows corporate dispensaries to retain loyal (but difficult) customers while also protecting staff members.
High Testers, High Milligrams, and Cheapest Products

The “I only” customer does not only apply to younger customers looking for specific products. Many customers are looking for high-testing cannabis strains or the highest THC milligram product. The high testing category was the most complained about the customer and was mentioned in almost every interview taken with budtenders.

In terms of the THC testing category, customers equate THC percentages with the highest value of product. Regardless, customers will often come in saying, “anything under 25 percent THC doesn’t get me high” or “if it’s not over 30 percent, it doesn’t get me high.” With the current literature on THC percentages, budtenders know that this is not an accurate representation of cannabis. Though THC percentage does affect the “high,” many industry experts point to the entourage effect as to why the highest THC might not actually get you the “highest.” The combination of the flavonoids and terpenes affects the way bodies interact with THC and its uptake into the body. Furthermore, the levels themselves are often doctored up by the dispensary, left out, or completely made up altogether. Regardless, this is often the first and only question asked by a customer when they walk in. Sam commented when saying, “It’s stupid as fuck, it should be, what terps ya got, not what percentage of THC.”

Along with high THC percentages, the equivalent in edibles is high THC milligrams in the product. Medical dispensaries now carry edibles up to 1000 milligrams of THC. When compared to the average edible dose of 5 milligrams a serving, 1000 milligrams in one chocolate bar is questionable. Some customers are parsimonious and only looking for the best deal, combining price and THC levels, or price and milligrams. This leads customers to think they are being frugal and going for the biggest bang for their buck.

The “High Testers” and the “I Only’s” have led to budtender fatigue; employees have simply grown tired of their glorified position of educational “budtender” since they rarely get asked about their specialized knowledge and are often treated as low-level retail associates. This has led some budtenders to go on auto-pilot and offer the highest testing products or cheapest products first, rather than waste their time and energy showing off different products that they know the customer will most likely not
purchase. Tourists and first-timers may even feel annoyed at the short answers to questions as they search for that experiential excitement; quoting Maryam Mirnetaghi, a cannabis brand advisor, noted,

The first products the Budtender suggested were the cheapest items they had in whichever product category I had asked for. I did not ask for the cheapest options or even for a good deal. Yet three out of the four budtenders who helped me never asked me more than one question about my wants or needs. - this could hurt your brand.

Davenport 2019, 199.

This quote shows the perspective of a first-time buyer who was treated more like a local customer than as a first-timer. You can tell the disappointment in walking away without having what she imagined as a “first experience.” It also shows how corporate brand managers are trying to create dispensary standards without understanding the socio-economic decision-making involved and the heterogeneity of customer preferences.

**Illegal Transactions**

At Centennial Health, large “wholesale” transactions were a common occurrence. When a large-scale sale was about to take place, the buyer would be asked not to make the deal in the budroom or around the cameras; rather, the buyer would finish the transaction in the personal office of the dispensary owner. Budtenders would not be told of these high quantity exchanges but would see the buyers leaving the dispensary with large cardboard boxes. Many times, the buyers were frequent customers or customers who would come in daily to purchase high extended plant count limits. Individuals who were 18 years old and purchasing pounds of cannabis with their extended plant counts were obviously not personal medical consumers.

The dispensary owner would also make wholesale deals with budtenders on occasion and would encourage these types of sales to people who were known in the cannabis social circles, and that could be “trusted.” Christina, one such budtender, would often garner good favor with the owner for doing large quantity deals. The owner benefits from wholesale transactions because the product was bought from another grow house and then directly sold on as part of the 30 percent wholesale allowance under vertical
integration. In this instance, the owner served only as a middleman as he did not produce the product but simply brokered the transaction, pocketing the small transactional profit in the middle.

In the Netherlands, coffeeshop owners have also been known to make large “unusual” purchase exchanges as “big single purchases have been known to occur” off the record in Amsterdam. (Jacques 2020, 200). One European budtender “dealer” went on to explain how 400 grams was exchanged at a local McDonald’s, and not in the shop. This was similarly instructed by the coffeeshop owner who told the personnel to meet the pickup down the block. Jack, the personnel, said she “felt like a very wrong dealer! Half a criminal!” (Jacques 2020, 200).

In each of these cases, it was clear the buyer had informal market intentions. Participants understood that the sales were “not right” and were straddling, if not going over, the line of legality. These are clearly defined specific customers; they are not tourists as cannabis tourists visiting legal markets have limits to consumption based on the days they are in the legal market. As Jack said, “tourists buy 1-2 grams, they are here for two or three days. How much can you smoke? Five grams is too much” (Jacques 2020, 101). The fact that large transaction sales occur within legal markets both in the United States, as well as Europe, shows that dispensary owners know how to bend the legal system to their benefit and supply informal markets. The transaction encompasses both black and white markets, turning both into a grey area. Both instances show a clear distinction between the front and backstage of what happens at any point of cannabis sales, and also point to system failures and loopholes that continue to occur in regulated markets (Jacques 2020, 101).

**Budtender as Informal Dealer**

Budtenders have created among themselves a cannabis code with unwritten rules to protect themselves and fellow employees. Budtenders need to rely on one another when a dangerous situation occurs, when customers are difficult, and also in covering for indiscretions that might be going on. This requires a certain amount of camaraderie and trust among budtenders. While talking with me about rule-breaking, budtenders were more than hesitant to come clean about what goes on in the shops. Participants
in the study often felt more confident speaking about the “other” rather than themselves. This theme extends to other cannabis economies, both informal and formal. In the Netherlands, participants claimed to “obey the rules but were unsure of their colleague’s activities” (Jacques 2020, 99). Some participants preferred to speak in the third person or the general “we,” distancing themselves from the perceived risk of losing their jobs or giving out too much information.

The fact that budtenders buy maximum quantities of cannabis to sell to the black market is commonplace. Budtenders operate in grey markets to supplement their low income and high standard of living in Colorado. Since budtenders saw a large number of black-market tourists enter the shop, selling products out of state was looked at as common practice with low risk. Low-risk illegality was also observed. Budtenders were more partial to sending look-a-like edibles back home to family and friends and often admitted to sending flower in plastic sealed pouches or hidden within other objects such as coffee, candles, etc. Effectively sending cannabis through the mail can be easily researched from online manuals created during cannabis prohibition. Though no budtenders identified themselves as full-time black market “dealers,” budtenders often viewed themselves as “helping” people out in illegalized markets. Since all budtenders are required to be 21, and recreational users also need to be 21, it was difficult to find qualitative information on supplying cannabis to younger people (under 18) as this was not brought up by any participant questioned during the study.

Conclusion

Budtenders face many challenges while working in I/legal sectors of the economy. Not only are their barriers to entry, such as upfront costs, residency, and criminal background checks, but they also take on a disproportionate amount of the difficulties of the industry, such as cash payments, high-security concerns, and difficult customers. This is further exacerbated by the fact that budtenders are often confused about their exact roles within the industry, as the role of budtenders continually changes. Furthermore, low wages lead them to make ends meet and pushed them into illegal markets. This chapter illuminates the need for an accurate job title and description for these front-line workers of the industry.
and outlines daily life and economic hardships faced by budtenders in Colorado. With the information taken about what it is like to work inside the dispensary, it is also pertinent to understand why people come, both in state and out of state, to the dispensary in the first place. In the recreational market, cannabis tourism is the main source of revenue, with thousands of tourists looking for a cultural experience while enjoying cannabis. The next chapter focuses on public and private events surrounding cannabis and also gives an overview of what tourists are looking for in terms of cultural events encompassing cannabis themes.
CHAPTER SEVEN:
CANNABIS TOURISM

Colorado’s unique cultural products help boost the tourist experience economy. Colorado is often presented as the Wild West mixed with an “elevated” culture, harkening back to its historical roots. Tourists from illegal cannabis states and international countries are curious, and they want to know how cannabis has changed Colorado culture. How has it enhanced it? How has cannabis been accepted and normalized in the everyday lives of a Coloradan? What is it like to experience cannabis freely and legally? Anyone can consume cannabis, but what makes consuming cannabis in Colorado unique? How is cannabis consumed in the tourist setting? This chapter analyzes the tourist experience and commodity economy through ethnographic data in the form of event analysis and participant observation at cannabis consumption events and cannabis holi-daze. This section seeks to answer those questions and also acts as a blueprint for a typical cannabis tour in the middle of “high season,” in and around 4/20 in Denver, Colorado.

Before cannabis legalization in the United States, Amsterdam was often synonymous with cannabis tourism. Traveling to Amsterdam also became a rite of passage for many young college and high school graduates who made their way to Europe for the infamous “backpacking around Europe” trips. As a young anthropologist, this experience was also something that I personally wanted to check off the list as a coming-of-age cannabis consumer. Similar to beer lovers enjoying Oktoberfest in Germany, cannabis consumers often idealized and dreamed of the opportunity to visit Amsterdam during the Cannabis Cup. However, tourists who travel to Amsterdam may leave with a different view than when they came in. Often the idyllic visions of them riding around small European streets stoned on a bicycle laughing with
friends is quickly replaced with awkward cultural interactions, tourist traps, uncomfortable buying experiences, and unintended overconsumption in public and in private spaces.

Fieldwork Journal 5/22/2019: How does it feel to be a Colorado Tourist? I’ll never know. 1) I was born here, and 2) I am already a part of the cannabis community. But that does not mean I can’t empathize with a cannabis tourist who enters the state. Before legalization, I too sought out legal countries to freely consume in, frequently visiting Amsterdam to experience the privilege of legalized cannabis.

The first time I went was on the cliché backpack trip to Europe after graduation, a trip that would later inspire a hard critic of modern backpacking culture in my master’s thesis in grad school years later. My partner and I ended up sitting in a hostel patio surrounded by packs of American college kids who were doing the exact same thing. Did I make the mistake of buying and consuming too much for a 48-hour trip? Yes. Did I end up in an edible-induced sleep-coma in the park of the red-light district? Yes. Was I particularly afraid? Not once.

I do look back and wonder if I had a different color, age, or gender if this would have been the same case, but anyone who has been to Amsterdam can tell you it is remarkably safe. They even filmed a reality show up and down the red district that I thought was much more boring than expected. And indeed, perhaps this is why the industry has survived so long. I remember seeing media headlines talking about how the locals were upset about cannabis tourists and how they no longer wanted tourists to come, though I, and the other packs of American youth, probably did not interact with the locals at all, as we were segregated into the tourist maze that is downtown Amsterdam.

On the second trip, I met two high school friends for a vacation from living in Istanbul. It was their first time, and they were incredibly excited to hit the town and explore the city. We had rented a tiny bedroom right above a head shop in the most saturated cannabis area of Amsterdam. As the boys prepared for a wild night out at the bars, I again, overconsumed and ended up not leaving the bedroom for much of the entire weekend, nor seeing my friends at any bars.

The third, and last, time I visited the city was in my mid-twenties when I seriously considered the University of Leiden for graduate school, mainly due to its proximity to a legal cannabis market. It was snowing, cold, and difficult to walk around the city regardless of how flat and beautiful the European town streets were. I took a bus out to Leiden, past windmills, and picturesque-looking houses. I smoked a joint on the corner, a bit paranoid as this was no longer the downtown city center full of similarly looking stoned tourists, but I tried to look cool, and trudged my way in the ankle-deep snow towards some tall buildings I assumed were the campus.

On the way towards the large buildings, I decided to stop and get a drink and some snacks at a grocery store on the way. While checking out, I had trouble with automated self-checkout since I didn’t speak Dutch. I asked the attendant for help, knowing that people in the Netherlands, and much of northern Europe, learn English
We looked at each other and I immediately felt disdain on her face, “excuse me, can you help me out here?” I asked. She looked at me and spoke in Dutch some more, sighing and rolling her eyes. I tried again, “Uh... yeah, so is this where I put in the money?” More polite, but obviously annoyed, she answered this time in perfect English, “you need to put the cash bills right here” - “ah, thank you”, she then practically threw the food and drink at me as I quickly hurried out.

Embarrassed by the whole situation and pissed off that she wouldn’t just speak to me in English, I looked at the building again. It seemed farther away now. The wind bit me harder and colder while I sweat inside my three layers of clothing. I paused for a moment and sighed and turned back to the bus stations for the hour-long trip back to central Amsterdam. I never made it one foot on any building on the Leiden campus. I had thought to myself if I could not go to the grocery store without being ridiculed. Two years of those experiences, regardless of the cannabis, did not seem appealing. It only occurred to me years later that perhaps she smelled the cannabis on me, along with the American English, which projected me as a “typical American tourist.”

Fast forward five or so years, and now I am the annoyed attendant rolling her eyes at the tourists, complaining about public consumption and tourists that are confused as to the rules and regulations on cannabis in Colorado. I can identify with the tourists who move here to be in legal states, as I once tried doing this as well, and I can definitely understand the tourists who come here with grandiose plans but end up spending the entire weekend hanging out in bed. I have yet to be back in Amsterdam, and might not know about Colorado’s legal market.

Today I saw an article that they are banning tourists from buying cannabis in Amsterdam altogether. I cannot say I blame them. Some days I want to ban them as well. However, as a current resident, the tourists help fund the five dispensaries that sit within one square mile of my home. Ironic that I looked for an excuse to leave the states for cannabis freedoms abroad when it would be a powerful political change in my home state just years later.

After Note: If you run into my parents, please don’t tell them - they still believe they funded an incredibly studious meeting with a potential advisor at the University of Leiden rather than a weekend of cannabis and croissants.

This passage shows that cannabis tourists often come with a long list of social, educational, and cultural activities to accomplish while visiting cannabis legal areas but being a cannabis tourist often results in consumption within private accommodations and rejection from local communities. Cannabis consumers who travel and purchase cannabis often 1) buy too much product then they can consume in a reasonable amount of time, 2) underestimate their bodies tolerance levels, and 3) end up canceling plans due to overconsumption. Due to indoor smoking rules and regulations, it can be hard to find a cannabis-
friendly hotel which has led to an explosion of alternative housing accommodation for tourists who are looking to consume cannabis without being in public. Though some local stakeholders may be profiting from the tourists in terms of alternative tourism, people who live within cannabis tourist areas are often unhappy about tourists over-consuming or smelling like cannabis in public areas. This creates a relationship between local economies and tourist economies that can be contentious despite the economic development.

This passage also relates to the younger demographic of cannabis consumers, who often conceal their true motives from family and friends while traveling to legal cannabis areas. Tourists will often mention they are looking forward to traveling to cannabis for outdoor recreation in the mountains but will often make a joking comment to the fact that cannabis is legal as well, an add-on benefit to the main activity. Many of these tourists’ main motivations are the opposite from what they socially project, as they are coming for legal cannabis, and everything else seems to be a possible activity to add to consumption.

The Cannabis Tourist

Global Cannabis tourism is currently underway as individuals cross state and country borders to take part in illicit tourist practices both for genuine purposes as well as “business trips” for informal actors. Many current budtenders are tourists-turned residents, as the legal industry has been seen as a window into another lived reality where cannabis consumption is not only socially acceptable, but also readily available. Wainwright (2013) notes that within the first nine months of legalized recreational sales, 44 percent of consumers came from outside the state of Colorado (221). In 2014, the first year of legal cannabis, Colorado made the same amount of tax revenue from out of state tourist sales than from residents, which means the Colorado cannabis market may be at risk due to federal legalization (Caulkins et al. 2016, 190, 216). Denver International Airport has seen a major increase in layovers, as cannabis limo services offer travelers on layovers comfortable opportunities to experience the cannabis industry
from the comfort of their own personal designated driver (Sullum 2015; Wainwright 2016, 222). The tourist boom has reinvigorated the tourism industry with creative cannabis-themed service commodities and tourism packages. Relying on Colorado’s heavy ski and snowboard tourism economy, tourists can book canna-ski chalets through the website Bud and Breakfast, a cannabis-friendly accommodation booking program (Economist 2016a). Cannabis taxi and bus tours have also been established, as well as a cannabis cooking course, puff, pass, and paint class, and sensual and relaxing marijuana massage options at spas. The adult industry has also seen profit increases with cannabis lube products, cannabis sex classes for beginners, and social events such as “bong and thong” parties (Borchardt 2017a; Economist 2016a). Animals as well are re-imagining their relationship with the plant, as beekeepers are training bees to make honey from cannabis plants rather than traditional flowers.

The tourism industry has also created new cultural capital items to collect as experience trophies for tourists (Bourdieu 1984; Economist 2016a). The highest esteemed object is the Colorado 4/20-mile marker and road signs bearing the Colorado state logo. These coveted possessions accrue their value from scarcity as Colorado no longer produces signs with 4/20 on them, rather 419.99 instead. Tourists may notice that hotel rooms and businesses no longer have the number 4/20 on rooms due to constant theft.

Cannabis tourists are often looking to escape the black-market connotations of illegal markets. They are looking for an improvement on their past experiences, wondering what it would be like to not have to go through the ritual of illegal cannabis buying. Namely, the improvements to legal cannabis are that tourists can always purchase when they want, in a friendly controlled environment. Unlike illegal weed, the product has no seeds or stems and there is general knowledge of what’s inside. Tourists also enjoy the familiar atmosphere recreational dispensaries offer, with little stigma in purchasing, and being able to ask questions that they never thought they would. Cannabis tourists may still be unfamiliar with the specific rules and regulations of Colorado. Leading them to play it safe and purchase a tourist package or van tour, creating a sense of ease and security. Just as well, as Colorado’s consumption regulations frequently change with the growing market.
Consumption Regulations for Public Good

Colorado’s State Indoor Clean Air Act (2006) has had major consequences for legal cannabis consumption in public areas. Cannabis consumption in any public space or private business is not allowed, including amusement venues, public parks and playgrounds, public transportation, sidewalks, roads, rooftop areas, bars/restaurants, malls, federal parklands, and auditoriums (Colorado Marijuana 2017; Hudak 2016, 158). The Colorado Indoor Clean Air Act, in conjunction with public consumption laws of Colorado, indicates that cannabis consumption cannot take place within 1,000 feet of any public or private school or within a 15-foot radius from an entrance to any establishment. Tourists may be surprised that hotels are only legally allowed to rent out 25 percent of their rooms to smoking occupants under the Act and, even then, cannabis consumption is illegal on patios and balconies if they are in view of the public (The Economist 2016c). Those who are renting apartments may have equal difficulty looking for cannabis-friendly leases, as most leasing companies now have a “cannabis clause” forbidding the consumption or possession of cannabis on their premises. Smaller boutique hotels and tourist businesses have filled the niche by creating cannabis-friendly hotels and environments.

Governor John Hickenlooper vetoed tasting rooms attached to dispensaries, a consumption practice that exists in other markets, such as California, and started to take shape in Colorado during the years of medical experimentation but has still allowed the idea of consumption license to exist. Hickenlooper has given only two licenses for consumption to local working businesses which include two locations: The Coffee Joint and Vape and Play Cannabis Lounge. Counties have begun to see ballot measures that ask the public to vote on more public consumption venues, but many outright decline to do so. Public Consumption businesses have stricter rules; they must be approved by at least one neighborhood group, they cannot be 1,000 feet from any school, recreation center, park, childcare establishments, or rehabilitation facility. Even when all of these conditions are met, the state can still decline a license. This happened in the case of Cindy Sovine who fulfilled all the requirements, except for her proposed location was 19.1 feet away from a childcare facility, not the required 20 feet (Warner 2017). Sovine decided to meet with the childcare facility who approved the location themselves and even
wrote a letter on behalf of Sovine to help with obtaining a license from the state. Despite all her efforts, the state denied her license regardless, which is a testament to the strict enforcement of regulations on consumption rather than sales (Warner 2017). Though this account may seem logical to many, consider that dispensaries often have interesting neighbors. Take for instance the Green Dragon dispensary in Sloan’s Lake, which sits directly next to the TLC Doll Hospital, a place frequented only by children and their parents.

Cannabis can be transported by consumers in private and public vehicles within the state of Colorado as long as the cannabis is not in an “open container,” meaning all cannabis products must be locked inside a child-proof container commonly referred to as an “exit bag.” Each of these exit bags, or childproof sealed products, is accompanied by a prescription sticker with the individual’s name and quantity of purchase included. Though regular citizens cannot consume in their own vehicles, the state does allow cannabis consumption in private, for-hire, transportation operations (vans, tours) as long as consumption only takes place by rear passengers (Colorado Marijuana 2017). Driving under the influence of cannabis, and driving while consuming cannabis, is still illegal and punishable with a DUI offense. According to the state department of Colorado, “anyone with five nanograms or more of delta 9-tetrahydrocannabinol per milliliter in whole blood (CRS 42-4-1301) while driving can be arrested for a DUI” (Colorado Marijuana 2017). Despite this hard line in the sand, technical instruments on the market are not yet reliable in testing the amount nor timeframe of cannabis consumption due to the way the body metabolizes cannabinoids (Colorado Marijuana 2017). In many ways, the industry and its regulation are caught in a Catch-22 situation: consumption testing technology is needed for the improvement before full-scale federal legalization, yet more states and industry actors need to have the capital and time to experiment with new technologies before legalization.

The rules of what constitutes a private versus public event have also been debated heavily. One case which represents the difficulties occurred in 2014 when the Colorado Symphony Orchestra marketed an even titled “Classically Cannabis: The High Note Series (Barcott 2015, 267-69). This event was the first and last “public” event hosted by an American Arts Organization in Colorado where cannabis was
encouraged to be consumed in a public setting (Barcott 2015, 268). Shortly after advertisements aired and tickets sold, a cease-and-desist letter was sent to the organization by the state who argued the concert was a public event since any member from the public could buy a ticket and attend. This would put the production into noncompliance as state marijuana prohibited smoking cannabis at public events. The state provided further examples of private and public gatherings for further clarification; a private event is defined as a group of people within a similar network where members of the public could not willingly join such event, with the example being a wedding party. To get around these public versus private sanctions, the American Arts Organization canceled all valid tickets to the event, yet simultaneously composed emails to ticket holders instructing them to donate funds to the orchestra. After the donor funds were accepted, a ticket to a “private donor appreciation” event would be provided (Barcott 2015, 269). Thus, this process of public versus private transferred the exchange from a capitalistic enterprise of a ticket bought on the market system between strangers (public event) to being framed as a gift exchange between two parties that share a relationship (private event).

Public consumption options remain a deterrent for both tourists and locals alike. Smoking venues will remain contested between the market and the public as more dispensaries continue to capitalize on legal sales. The years ahead will see the passing of small piece laws that will slowly erode current regulations on public consumption. Restaurants, hotels, music venues, will begin to be able to apply for social cannabis permits for events that have occurred and will also want to capitalize on these events and push for tasting rooms, based on brewery markets, which residents have seen more of at the ballot box in certain counties. Mobile lounges, limos, and tour buses have also become a larger part of the cannabis market due to public consumption, with new concepts and options for mobile consumption (Mitchell 2020). One thing is clear, the debate on public consumption for locals and tourists alike will continue to fluctuate until a new normal is found, then again, in the case of Amsterdam, how long will the tourist industry last?
Meg the Budtender

Colorado has even created an idealized form of budtender to help educate first-timers on consumption practices and regulation. This character is known as “Meg the Budtender,” a 20-something year old that dispenses weed wisdom and tips for responsible marijuana use (Alkire n.d.). Meg the Budtender delivers her own millennial-inspired version of the Colorado Department of Health’s “Responsibility Grows Here” campaign message (Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment. 2020). She speaks directly to the public through television screens and advertisements, she seems more like a friend or big sister rather than a state-sponsored campaign. The commercials make her seem relatable, trustworthy, outdoorsy, and overall fun to be around. The state specifically created her narrative, and the tone does not feel condescending or judgmental towards those who consume cannabis. Her persona also creates an educational platform for the Colorado Department of Health to have a direct conversation with the public about responsible marijuana use. Meg the budtender symbolizes not only an idealized version of what a budtender represents, but she is also looked at as an inspiring role model to budtenders and cannabis tourists alike. Her carefully created persona is easy to recognize in the commercials produced for public consumption shown below.

Commercial Advertisement #1 “Keep it at Home”

Text Banner: Meg’s budtender tips.

Meg: “I’m just packing for a night in the mountains, but one thing I’M NOT packing is weed. Because it's illegal to use marijuana in public.”

Meg works hard to stuff even more clothes into her backpack and throws it nonchalantly on her back- looking at the camera.

Meg: “Everybody has the right to fresh air, especially in the mountains- so don’t ruin somebody else’s camping trip,”

She gives a half wink.

Meg: “Leave your weed at home.”

The banner comes on displaying the tagline “responsibility grows here.”

Commercial Advertisement #2 “Out of Reach”

Megs is seen in her small white kitchen holding a hot beverage in a warm mug – the scene is set like a Full House commercial with a “live” audience and upbeat music.

Meg: “People always ask me, Meg, is keeping your weed out of reach good enough? And my answer is always….”

Meg opens one of the kitchen cabinet doors to reveal a small boy with a large missing front tooth who is hiding behind the cabinet.

Boy: I'm going to live here forever!

Audience laughs. Meg looks at the camera in annoyed amusement and closes the cabinet door with the boy still inside.

Meg: No!

Meg pauses and turns dramatically to a new camera angle.

Meg: Kids can get into anything, no matter how old they are, so be sure to always keep your marijuana locked up and never use it in public.

The scene goes black as the audience roars and claps. The boy's voice comes from behind the closed cabinet.

Boy: “I'm sleeping with the dishes!”

Commercial Advertisement #3 “Chill Out”

Text banner comes on: Megs budtender tips

There no audience in this one. Meg is seen in her living room, still wearing her budtender badge around her neck. She is listening to music with large earphones but takes them off to speak to the camera.

Meg: “It can take up to four hours for an edible to kick in, so before you go back in for another, just try and chill out for a little bit.”

Meg puts the headphones back on and raises her voice to speak with the audience

Meg: “Like listening to a book on vinyl! I love this chapter!”

Meg is seen looking off into the distance, smiling and listening to her book on tape.

(Alkire n.d.)

These three commercials in tandem show the government’s targeted messages. The first one centers around consumption restrictions on federal land. Since Colorado hosts a plethora of national parks
that do not fall under legalization, and my tourists look forward to consuming cannabis in a natural setting. This commercial was specifically created to let individuals be aware of the fact that just because one is physically in a legal state, consumption is not legal in all parts of the state. The second commercial specifically targets the storage of cannabis in households with minors. It is set in a 90s style family show to target a specific audience, the millennial generation who have, or will be having, young children during this experiment of legalization. The 90s style sitcom is familiar to the target audience as it evokes a sense of childhood and connects their memories of childhood with ideals about children today. The commercial urges residents to “lock-up” their cannabis, framing the commodity as something dangerous that should not only be hidden but locked. When considering cannabis’s closest commodified cousins, prescription medication and alcohol, this advice seems exaggerated and is reminiscent of public health commercials on gun violence. Also, taking into long term effects of overconsumption, both alcohol, and prescription medication can kill children who consume them, whereas medical evidence shows that a child would need to consume almost a fourth of their body weight in cannabis flower for death to occur. The last commercial presented can be seen as the public health and safety statement against over-dosing of edibles, a problem frequently spoken about both within and outside of the cannabis community. Law enforcement and medical professionals get hundreds of calls annually about people consuming cannabis and becoming paranoid or overdosing. This commercial gives those who may be inexperienced in taking edibles some tips for when they think they may have under-consumed and over-consumed. It is very common to over-dose on edibles due to each body’s unique metabolism in conjunction with the day's meals which also have a great effect on how edibles are broken down by the body. Meg tells the audience to “chill out,” meaning to be cognizant of what is happening before eating more edibles and re-directs their attention to something they can concentrate and relax on, like listening to music or a book on tape. “Keep it at home,” “Chill Out,” and “Out of Reach” are the three guilt-free and judgment-free slogans that help educate tourists and locals to become informed about some of the most visible consumption issues facing the cannabis industry.
Market-led Cannabis Festivals and Celebrations

4/20 and 7/10

The cannabis celebration is known as “4/20,” is the coveted cannabis celebration day that can be traced to the origin story of the “Legend of the Waldos” circa the 1970s (Holcombe 2017). In California, a group of students in high school would refer to themselves as “the Waldos” and would meet after school at precisely 4:20 p.m. to take part in cannabis libations together. This time of day was ideal as their parents would still be at work, leading to unsupervised fun for the group of friends. The timing was so catchy that they used it as a code around unsuspecting “grownups.” The code caught on, and the myth of the Waldo’s entered into circulation. Currently, public 4/20 celebrations that take place on April 20 (i.e., 4/20) are in full force in legal states where everyone from dispensaries, to churches, to food corporations, have financially benefited from the holiday. Typically, participants enjoy smoking in public areas as policemen “look the other way” for a 24-hour liminal period of public consumption or meet up with friends and eat specialty food items together at parties.

Two major 4/20 events have historically taken place in Colorado regardless of the legal status of cannabis, the first is Civic Center Park 4/20 Celebration, and the second was historically held at the University of Colorado, Farrand Field Norlin Quad. Civic Center Park was not chosen arbitrarily. In 1996, before legalization, Ken Gorman, a marijuana rights activist and air force vet, held a rally of disobedience on the steps of the state capital, which overlooks Civic Center Park. During the rally, he smoked a cannabis joint as an act of free-will and protest and in 2007. After that incident, Gorman was tragically murdered, with the assailant still yet to be found by Denver police (Sensi Magazine 2018). Many still show up to the steps of the capital to continue Gorman’s tradition. As one protester said, “Fuck the Denver police, we are there for his memory. It's civil disobedience at its finest.” You will still see Ken Gorman allies on 4/20 on the steps of the capital, holding up social justice signs and asking the police to revisit his cold-case murder. After legalization, people continue to celebrate at Civic Center Park as a tradition started by Gorman. The festivities took on new life as the celebration began to grow post-
legalization, with dispensaries offering discounts, and out-of-state tourists looking to join in on the experience. The city has had to find new ways to keep the event regulated as the years pass, as the event is open to the public, including children.

Civic Center Park 4/20 also boasts popular artists for free the concerts that start at 4:20; performances by Snoop Dog, Wiz Khalifa, and Lil Wayne are some of the musicians that have played in past years. Around 250 companies are presently selling a myriad of products mainly geared towards consumption and fashion, with over 125,000 participants visiting the festival, there is much market opportunity to be had with such foot-traffic (Sensi Magazine 2018). Due to the nature of the event, food trucks are a must to control overconsumption. Beverage and food trucks often have long lines of hungry customers waiting. Though the event is free, anyone can upgrade for $150 for VIP tickets near the stage, giving them firsthand access to the best seats for the concert and the ability to experience the festival in a less crowded environment (THC Magazine 2016). Due to Colorado wild weather patterns, 420 has been canceled altogether due to snowstorms, as was the case in 2016 when a blizzard hit Denver, deterring party-goers from attending the event at all.

Younger cannabis consumers have started to repel these earlier forms of celebration as they no longer see the “big deal” with cannabis consumption now that it is a legal commodity. For those who consume daily, 4/20 no longer becomes a fun and cheeky way to get together and celebrate a subculture. Especially during its illegality, the social rule-breaking of the event was one of the main causes of the celebration in itself; the focus was on shared experiences of rule-breaking and activism, then it was the experience of cannabis consumption. It was thought of as a clandestine holiday that forged relationships and centered around the imagined community of cannabis smokers. There is also a sense of resentment towards current consumers who are getting it “free and easy” without the social risks, as 4/20 gatherings were thought of as production of shared solidarity, one day of rule-breaking, or liminality, with cannabis use. As Robinson says in his article “The Curmudgeon’s Guide to 4/20”:

It didn’t always use to be this way. Some of us remember simpler days when April 20 was a private moment shared between friends behind closed doors. A time when
edibles came in only one flavor - brownie - and we baked them ourselves. A time when we spent hours of driving from house to house, uphill both ways through the snow, making nice with complete strangers who knew a guy who knew a guy who knew another guy who could definitely score us a fat dime bag of crusty brick weed (Robinson 2018).

As 4/20 becomes more prevalent around the world, and among the general population as opposed to the cannabis subculture, more pre-legal consumers have taken issue with the way that the holiday, which was once a celebration of the counter-culture, has now been turned into a market-led capitalist holiday. One participant commented, “we don’t need a consumer ‘holidaze’ but we do need culture. 4/20 started on a dead tour and spread across the globe. The greed of society and legalization has made it all about money. ‘Hemp can save the world,’ or so we thought. Instead, it turned culture into a consumer holiday.” Alternative cannabis brands have even gone so far as to criticize the holiday outright. CannabisFeminist Instagram posted a photo with cannabis being rolled by a dollar bill with the caption “we don’t need a consumer holiday to celebrate our love for the plant. Every day is 420!” The comments were varied, and even one commenter felt opposed by saying, “funny, I see this as the opposite. We need 420 because of consumerist mentality taking over the cannabis world.”

This sentiment is also experienced in the downfall of the University of Colorado celebration that began in 1997. The event at the University of Colorado was similar to Civic Center Park, but with some key differences. Firstly, the crowd was composed of college students or college-aged students who had come in to celebrate the holiday in Boulder. For many students, the 4/20 celebration, and the lore and fantasy that surrounded 4/20, were some of the main reasons students chose to attend the University of Colorado. Lastly, the environment was more controlled, as the college campus posed different challenges than a public event taking place near a government building in the center of a large bustling city.

In 2012 the university had enough of the highly publicized event pre-legalization and decided to fight back against the 4/20 events on campus. They lured the crowds to a Wyclef Jean concert while they secretly put dead fish pieces onto the lawn of where the event was held. This was done to deter the crowds that swarmed and basked the campus in large puffs of cannabis smoke, so much so that the
buildings began to disappear (Robinson 2018). The school complained that the event devalued the student's degree's by being labeled as a party school. After this final counteract of protest from the university, officials decided to close the campus entirely the following years. Police officials were hired after 2012 to give anyone who went onto the field a trespassing ticket on April 20th since that campus area was officially closed. Students rioted against their poor treatment with a variety of student-led documentaries, protests, and literature fighting against the school’s position. One student in 2012 commented, “I think this is ridiculously stupid, if the school was really serious about trying to change its party reputation, it needs to begin with the drinking on campus and the ridiculous reputation we have for the amount of sexual assaults that happen on campus every day, not on a single day of the year, so if we are really trying to keep us students safe, we need to start with a realistic way to address the problems instead of a scapegoat on this one day, making a huge deal about an issue that is not the issue facing most students” (Boulder News Team 2012). Lately, after legalization, there has been no prohibition on cannabis consumption on the quad, but only a small number of students now gather. Long gone are the days were 80,000 students show up to participate in public cannabis consumption (Sensi 2018).

Though 4/20 has expanded beyond state lines into becoming an international holiday, there are also local versions in Colorado that serve similar purposes; 7/10 is 4/20’s sister holiday and has been heralded as Colorado’s homespun version since 2012, sometimes also referred to as “oil day” or “dab day.” Though 4/20’s origin story is still a thing of stoner myth, 7/20 can be traced to something simple. The dabbing community explains the origin of the holiday as simply needing a stoner holiday for concentrate users specifically and a date that worked. Online blogs point to turning a calculator upside down with the writing 7/10 to reveal the word OIL. Though 4/20 may be celebrated by the common public, 7/10 is often celebrated by those specifically in the cannabis community, particularly those who enjoy concentrates and dabbing (Rough 2016).
The Cannabis Cup

The Cannabis Cup is the Olympics of the cannabis industry and often goes hand in hand with the holiday of 4/20. The first Cannabis Cup started in 1987 when the editor of *High Times* magazine came back from a trip to the Netherlands was became deeply inspired by the cannabis industry there (Barcott 2015). Often described as “part competition, part tribal gathering,” the Cannabis Cup is an important event where cannabis commodities are hierarchically ranked compared to a set of characteristics including taste, form, and potency (Barcott 2015, 231). The Cannabis Cup has grown since its inception into a convention that spans nations and inspires millions to take part in cannabis tastings as “cannabis connoisseurs.” The first legal Cannabis Cup in the United States was held in Denver, Colorado, at the Denver Mart in 2013, and it was extraordinary since this was only the second time leaving the city of Amsterdam. In total, around 17,000 people made it to the first Cannabis Cup, a number that would grow to around 37,000 people each day the following year at the sold-out event. Colorado businesses generated around $7 million in revenue from hosting the Cannabis Cup in 2014 (Barcott 2015, 232). The Cannabis Cup held at the Denver Mart included all the top vendors that cannabis had to offer at that stage of legalization. The event consisted of varying components, similar to any business conference. The event included roundtable discussions, indoor exhibitions, and outdoor consumption and shopping opportunities. There were also new and exciting technologies on display. Products like mechanical trimmers were often things rumored about, yet not seen. The vape pen was also starting its boom, with new designers, new temperature settings, and dual vapes for flower and concentrates. Outside there were consumption venues, dab stations, and plastic chairs for those to sit down at. Colorado had banned the sale of unlicensed marijuana, but there were still grey areas of “trade.” Many booths sported dab stations for “free” for an exchange of a donation (Barcott 2015, 235). The Cannabis Cup included cultural aspects of Colorado that the European market found unusual. For one, dogs could enter the market, and many canine species were present during the event, as Barcot would say later in his book, “Dogs: who brings a dog to a marijuana convention?” (2015, 235). This is where Barcott missed the specific brand of Colorado cannabis capitalism and the “wild west” nature of Colorado culture that led the legalization. Despite
commercials stores banning canines, Colorado often serves as a liminal area where rules and laws are often bent, as no good cowboy would be seen without their trusty companion, even at the Cannabis Cup.

The high didn’t last long for Cannabis Cup attendees as the necessary permits to hold the event were rejected by the county after 2017 (Baca 2016). The city did not want to continue hosting due to the overwhelming number of individuals, the trash and debris left around the building and surrounding area, and because residents voiced their disapproval of the event. There was some media attention following the permit's denial as to the event possibly being relocated south to the city of Pueblo, which was “met with the same enthusiasm you’d have for an eighth of schwag” (Sensi Magazine 2018). Below find the fieldwork journal entry for the Cannabis Cup that the researcher attended in its first year outside of Europe in Denver, Colorado.

Fieldwork Journal: 4/20/2015: I admit I had more anxious anxiety surrounding the event rather than being fun and relaxed. Everything was unexpected. What was going to happen? For the first time, the legendary cannabis cup was being held in Colorado and...it was legal! What did that mean? What were the rules? I think most of us just showed up and waited to see what others were doing as we all awkwardly looked around and shifted our feet from side to side in line. Some came in costumes, some came drunk, most of the rest looked like normal folks wanting to have a good time. We decided to be responsible adults and take a rideshare there, but as we got off the main highway, you could see the traffic backed up for miles along the exit. Dead stop. People started ditched their rideshares altogether while stuck on the highway, leaving them in traffic and walking on foot toward the large grey building miles down the road. The Denver Merchandise Mart is one of those buildings in a city that serves a purpose, and that’s about it, advertised as the “premier tradeshow facility in the Rocky Mountain 14 state region” it often hosts large public events, not fancy, but the shared space of it is often admiring. The building looks more like a tan storage facility, with over 275,000 Sq ft of large rooms, hallways, all on one sprawling ground floor.

When we finally got through the door, we were welcomed by long winding lines, Disney world lines, that seemed to have no end. After seeing the excited pre-partying crowds outside, standing in a long, never-ending line of hundreds of people was a real buzzkill. We all waited to be checked through security and let into the largely empty massive building. As we qued up, small groups here and there began cheering or singing songs as personal entertainment while waiting in the lines. Once the security checkpoint was open, the whole crowd cheered together in a huge cacophony. The lines started moving, and the feeling amongst the crowd turned into an exciting rumble. No one knew what to expect as we moved further inside the dark building.
Once we passed security, we were confused. Where was everyone? The crowd was ushered through various enormous and empty conference halls until we entered the last open space, which was a sizable indoor warehouse with access to an outdoor patio area. We began to see other crowds of people, which seemed to put us at ease—we were in the right place after all. The outdoor portion was strictly walled off to the public, and participants had to take the same way out that they came in, back through the maze of hallways and empty rooms. I chuckled to myself, “so many stoned people are going to get lost in this place!”

The indoor warehouse space was reserved for cannabis educators and concept specialists that were not interested in consumption. This included growing technicians, lighting companies, and a few retail booths selling hemp products like bags and t-shirts. There seemed to be little engagement with these booths from ticketholders, and most were excited about consuming, not the technical grow aspects. Though participants politely walked by the indoor booths, they were all headed for the outdoor consumption booths instead.

The outdoor section housed a large entertainment stage with market-style canopied booths where businesses could display their wares. The outside mainly consisted of local and out-of-state vendors who were trading concentrates and edibles for donations. There were a significant number of booths geared towards bringing in customers with teams of scantily clad women, targeting men for donations. Head shops of all different qualities were represented, so customers could choose from $5 consumption products to $5,000 functional art pieces. There were little to no non-cannabis food or beverage vendors, which was surprising considering the consumption aspect of the event.

Interestingly enough, there was only one small area of plastic chairs for people to rest on. I found my way to them to people watch. At one point in the late afternoon, a guy stood up on a chair—“hey everyone! We are about to hand out some free pens!” People perked up, “free pens?! At this point, cannabis vaporizer pens were new on the market and fairly expensive. As the crowd gathered, people started looking around and getting a bit restless, “where da pens at?” the crowd murmured. After a few seconds, loud booming music started with a representative taking the mic, “free pens!” he screamed as he started throwing heavy boxes into the air. As the boxes started to fall with a thud into the crowd, people started grabbing at the ground, as a pinata had just exploded. After the second or third box was flung into the air, the commotion within the landing zone got more intense, with people aggressively tussling over who grabbed the pen box first. At one point, a fight broke out+. I looked over at my friend—“Uhm, this is getting a bit outta hand, no? Like for a pen? I thought we were all supposed to be laid back stoners?” We sat there and scooted our chairs back, even more, to make sure we didn’t get caught in the overflow of the kerfuffle that seemingly began to grow even larger. “I think it’s time to leave now,” I said.

This fieldwork entry shows how cannabis consumers fled in droves to attend the Cannabis Cup. Out of state tourists entered into state lines to become a part of the “first” Cannabis Cup held in the
states. For many consumers, a trip overseas is out of their financial reach, but to fly to Colorado was less of an economic barrier to the event. This also caused overflows of tourists in northern Denver, which the city was woefully unprepared for, as evidenced by the highway blockages and people abandoning their rideshares for walking instead. The journal entry also points to the shared camaraderie of cannabis consumers who were excited to be taking part and cheered and sang together while waiting in lines. Since consumption was taking place, this caused operational difficulties in moving people through from the entrance to different areas of consumption, leading to confusion and added risk when taking into account dangers that may result from overconsumption. The bartering of products and donations also harkened back to the illegal market sector rather than a legalized industry of money in exchange for commodities.

The city was unprepared for the event, which was imagined to be a transformative experience, ended up being a confusing hodgepodge of quasi-legal rules and added barriers that didn’t sit well with tourists who had flown in or attended the event, nor locals who were tasked with the clean up of thousands of people. In many ways, the event tarnished the brand reputation that was so highly regarded in the cannabis community. The disappointment of the tourist experience, and the local outcry of mismanagement of the influx of participants, lead to the eventual cancelation of the event altogether.

**Kushcon (2010-2011): The Colorado Cannabis Convention**

Kushcon was a short-lived two-year stint in having a business-focused, non-consumption, cannabis convention. It drew 500 vendors from 16 countries, all to one indoor business event center (Shuman 2010). The event was full of businessmen in appropriate attire, buzzing with excitement. Footage from the event shows a man in square glasses and Apple pods looking into his camera with enthusiasm exclaiming excitedly, “this is just the beginning.” Cheryl Shuman, the PR and media director of the event, tried to focus the event more on “serious” issues rather than lifestyle In reality, and was quotes at the event saying, "I want to leave a legacy. I want to stand for something, and this is my chance. Colorado is the center of the universe for cannabis, and that's why we're here. We're going to make history"(Roberts 2010). There was little to distinguish the event from any other business convention, the
words on the sizable poster signage behind each booth could have been exchanged for any other commodity without notice. Politicians, scientists, and regulating authorities all met to discuss various aspects of the cannabis economy. If you were walking around the room, you would hear common market-led buzz words like “most respected” “trending” “production demos” being exchanged with business cards and free company lanyards. It also attracted a more professional cannabis-friendly crowd, with topics like patient safety, agricultural quality, and clean product models (Shuman 2010). Website development was also a huge topic on everyone’s minds, as apps and smartphones were making considerable profits in the business industry. Newly proposed cannabis apps like “Where’s the Weed?” were pitched to potential investors, but few ever came to fruition. Unfortunately, Kushcon did not survive the industry for more than two years, most likely due to banned consumption at the event.

Cannabis Weddings

The wedding industry in Colorado hosts 41,000 weddings a year at an average cost of $24,000 per wedding (TheWeddingReport.com 2019). That means brides are spending around one million dollars on Colorado annually. It’s no surprise that weddings and weed have found a crossover for certain consumer-friendly brides and their guests. Colorado has capitalized on the market with specialized cannabis wedding companies, custom hemp dresses, and wedding expos tailored to the cannabis-friendly bride.

The Colorado Cannabis Wedding Expo is an elegantly curated boutique wedding expo that started in 2016. While there is no cannabis at the actual event, brides are presented with ideas of how cannabis can be incorporated into their special day based on their specific styles. For example, some brides decide to use a bouquet of cannabis instead of the traditional flowers, while others decide on using cannabis in the take-home party gifts for guests. For some, cannabis is strictly reserved for the afterparty only, where tables are elegantly decorated with bong vases and joint packs labeled “love is in the air” (Cannabis Wedding Expo n.d.).
The internet is also teaming with articles on cannabis and weddings, with titles like “How to Plan a Weed-Friendly Wedding” to “Elevating your Wedding with Weed” (Sims 2019; Bruce 2018). The industry has picked up on the changing sentiment of the general public as the social taboo of cannabis at formal events may be losing its power. Cultivating Spirits is a company that specializes in these types of cannabis-friendly experiences for wedding parties. Their website gives newly engaged couples advice for planning a cannabis-friendly wedding, bachelor party, girl’s night out, or rehearsal dinner. They cater everything from “discrete nods to cannabis” to “extravagant full-service cannabis bars” (Sims 2019; Bruce 2018)

In terms of fashion and gowns, the cannabis connoisseur bride has options. Specialized wedding dresses can be made from hemp with an added option of weaving cannabis flowers into the dress's lace. High Vibe Bride makes around 20 cannabis-inspired wedding gowns a year, which they ship all over the country. High Vibe Bride has reported more customers flooding their website every year. “It's still very much of an emerging market,” the owner told Merry Jane Magazine, “Generally, I keep it more subtle, so the fabric is hemp but then maybe there’s some embroidery that’s very [lowkey so] that your grandmother will be like, ‘Oh, how beautiful, look at those beautiful maple leaves on your gown! (Bruce 2018)’” Regardless of how soon-to-be brides feel about cannabis, the options are there for them to explore in Colorado.

Cannabis Cultural Productions

No one can deny the link between food, tourism, and cannabis. The byproduct of many highs, appetite enhancement of cannabis is indeed one of its most talked-about properties. The cannabis brownie often takes center stage, with legendary figures like Brownie Marie, who cooked cannabis brownies for her friends dying of HIV/AIDS, to various social and cultural references of accidentally eating “magic brownies” and the adventures that ensue, cannabis has always been linked with its edible properties.

For those looking for a quick bite to eat, a down-to-earth sandwich from Cheba Hut, the cannabis-themed sandwich chain is perfect. Cheba Hut “toasted” subs started in 1998 by Scott Jennings, who
wanted to combine his love for his favorite “counterculture” and good food. There are over thirty handmade sandwiches and twenty beers on tap, which may seem counter-intuitive to some, but cannabis consumption is not allowed in any of the stores. The menu and branding all include cannabis references with sandwiches named after popular strains like “The Chronic” and “The Kush” and “Cottonmouth Cures” as code for their array of fountain drinks and beverages. Cheba Hut’s mascot is a clever bluebird who seems to be intoxicated and “smoking” a large sandwich. (ChebaHut.com n.d.)

At the beginning of legalization, edibles were often sold from edible-focused dispensaries that would make cannabis-infused oil or butter, and then proceed to cook actual food products with it. For example, Ganja Gourmet in Denver was famous for its bake at home pizzas and cartons of butter that were sold. As consumers and producers alike started to learn more about the dangers of edibles, restrictions on cannabis food products followed. This was exacerbated by the fact that edible production themselves at that time was not overlooked by food and safety regulators, leading to the possibility of unsanitary conditions and health concerns over food productions. Currently, dispensaries are the only places where consumers are legally allowed to buy edibles infused with cannabis. Though private restaurants, event venues, and bars can have cannabis consumed on their premises, it needs to be a private party with cannabis products purchased from the recreational market before being brought in.

Cannabis cooking classes are also incredibly popular in Denver for locals and tourists alike. Many consumers are looking to integrate cannabis into their lifestyles, which include food preferences. Some cooking students sign up for classes to help administer cannabis for medical reasons and are looking to make the products themselves for safer ingredients and doses. The cooking side of cannabis has gotten an added boost from the TV industry, which has also started producing cannabis-based cooking shows. The Netflix show “Cooked with Cannabis” is a gourmet cooking show where contestants infuse their concoctions with cannabis in the hopes of taking home a $10,000 prize (Award 2020). Harold Sims, who lives in Denver, won the season’s competition with his African-inspired menu.

Other specialty cooking classes are popular as well. The “Sushi and Joint Rolling” class, taught by a personal chef, is one option for those looking to experiment. One can also hire a private chef to come
to your home to show you how to cook your own edibles or host friends for an infused dinner party. As long host purchases the products themselves and are in a private place, anyone over the age of 21 is allowed to experiment with eating cannabis-infused food products. Here’s one recipe:

**The Ultimate Slow Cooker Cannabis Butter Recipe:** Grab 7 grams (a quarter) of your favorite cannabis flower and throw it in the blender. Take the blender weed and plop it on a cookie pan in the oven at 230 for 20-ish minutes (this is called decarboxylation and cannot be skipped!). Take it out of the oven, mix the pot with 1 cup of coconut oil (can use vegetable or olive), and drop in a slow cooker. Slow cook at simmer anywhere from 3-12 hours, depending on your living situation and how much you can tolerate the smell. Strain the solids out, refrigerate, and use as you would typical butter. Estimated 1 teaspoon per serving = roughly 3 mg per serving of THC per teaspoon.

**The Cannabis Sommelier**

Due to cannabis’s relationship to alcohol and the alcohol industry, it should come as no surprise that there have been reproductions based on one industry that is subsequently supplanted onto the other. Take, for instance, the cannabis sommelier, which has emerged as a cannabis aficionado, teaching neophytes how to interpret cannabis terpenes by using their senses. This is just one of the many overlaps of the alcohol and cannabis industry, as alcohol companies have been “trying to create fresh mash-ups to entice a new group of people who already enjoyed wine to discover cannabis” (Cabot 2020, 189). This specialized knowledge is packaged for educational purposes, with emerging cannabis sommeliers to help teach new consumers and tourists about Colorado terroir and terpenes. Cannabis sommeliers use tasting wheels to help consumers describe the taste and smell of cannabis strains. A typical tasting wheel has descriptive language remarkably similar to wine sommeliers to describe flavor profiles for the palate; a cannabis strain could be earthy, spicery, floral, fruity, for example. Likewise, when smelling cannabis product, one might find a musky, sweet, or chemically astringent properties that help distinguish strains by their specific terpene profiles. Many arrays of flavors and aromas regarding cannabis can be categorized and distinguished between genetic strains, adding to the fascination and complexity that helps drive new consumers. Sight is essential, as a sommelier will teach one how to rigorously evaluate a
cannabis flower bud only by sight, by looking at its structure, the visible hairs, and the color of its trichomes.

Terroir, the unique composition of soil unique to place, is often attributed to the range of cannabis flavor profiles. Terroir also relates back to alcohol consumption with the historical origin of the Coors Brewery who only uses rocky mountain freshwater from Clear Creek, Golden, to make superior beer. Many point to Colorado’s high elevation, natural landscape, and dry atmosphere to account for the quality of cannabis products compared to other markets. This seems to be a logical marketing leap as Cabot notes in her sommelier themed cannabis novel The New Chardonnay: “In Coors Country, cracking open a cold one was part of the local identity, Coors Brewing Company was the first brewer in the nation to sell beer in an aluminum can, the emblem of an American Tradition” (Cabot 2020, 189). This quote brings together the pioneering nature of Coloradans and the terroir and regional brand identity of the market similar to cannabis. As recreational cannabis reaches new markets and new consumers, cannabis sommeliers are projected to gain momentum; marketing tactics often exploit a commodity-linked with the environment as a unique commodity that attracts higher profits. These place-specific commodities incorporate the local into the global and create a new professional market for those looking to get out of the dispensary itself. In fact, Cannabis Now Magazine recently published an article entitled “Wealthier People are Replacing Wine with Cannabis,” which goes on to outline that 67 percent of adults were more likely to substitute alcohol for weed when it becomes federally legal. That would mean cannabis would take a substantial part of the market that may have been reserved for the wine industry. After speaking with Max, a Colorado cannabis sommelier, he noted how he was moving on in his life stages, and working as a budtender no longer fit his lifestyle: “I didn’t get anywhere my entire life as a budtender, I didn’t make money. I needed to take care of my family. We are not in the business of working for free, we need to make money, so instead of being a budtender or doing activism, I am doing the right thing, providing good high-level education to educate as many budtenders, growers, moms, police officers as I can to truly help people.” With the advent of recreational cannabis, the market has become rich with new professions and products, like the cannabis sommelier. However, the cannabis sommelier can only
operate as long as there are many different varietals to be found, which coincidentally coincides with the growing number of craft cannabis companies specializing in small-scale batches of elite cannabis. These new products will follow a steady stream of new professionals, once only found in the state run-dispensary sector.

**International Church of Cannabis**

It may be unsurprising that 73 percent of religiously unaffiliated participants were overwhelmingly in support of full legalization in 2013 (Galston 2013). However, the unexpected emergence of local worshippers of cannabis that have emerged in the Colorado community may come as a surprise. Cannabis laws regarding religious institutions have been tested in Denver with the re-purposing of a 113-year-old church named the International Church of Cannabis which opened on 4/20/2017 (Pasquariello 2017). The International Church of Cannabis sits on Logan Street in Denver and is officially designated as a local “community center.” This nonprofit religious organization gives a sacred place for its “Elevationist” (as they self-identify) members to enjoy its primary sacrament, cannabis (Elevationist.org 2021). Members have to pay a membership fee and are only allowed to consume cannabis within the church on Sunday. The newfound religion is said to have no authoritarian structure, or claim to theology, but encourages people to find and become the best version of themselves. It just so happens that they also believe cannabis can help them on their journey. The churches principles are very much up to interpretation, as free thought and anti-authoritarianism is celebrated; the messages from the church to its members remind them “it is not to be dictated to or by us as Elevationists… we have no idea what the meaning of your life is… as Elevationists, we believe that your spiritual journey to find your meaning will be accelerated by using the sacrament of cannabis” (Elevationist.org 2021). The vast majority of what Elevationists believe is individualistic in nature and encourages members to be on their own spiritual journeys, as evidenced by their carefully chosen term “universal creative force” to describe a greater power. Nevertheless, why should these Elevationists be taken seriously? One explanation given illuminates ideas of ethnocentrism and cultural relativity by answering, “should we be
taken as seriously as the folks who believe that Jonah lived in the belly of a giant fish or that the wife of Lot turned into a pillar of salt?” Other popular questions posed on the internet are: What do they do in a cannabis church? Do they do weddings? Can you smoke inside? Do you have to smoke cannabis to be a member?

Firstly, the use of cannabis within the church is completely restricted due to the indoor clean air act. Members are required to donate and be at least 21 years of age if they want to attend gatherings, but any age can attend the event “BEYOND: A Guided Meditation and Laser Light Experience.” Keeping with the theme, the guided meditation show starts 20 minutes past the hour, an ode to 4/20, and costs $25 per person to enjoy the show. On the church’s website, their explanations of incorporating 420 into their message is explained:

The Christian religion took symbols of fertility like eggs and rabbits and just made them part of their celebrations. Rebirth is the message of the Christian Easter. So those pagan symbols of the cycle of life still reinforce the basic message. We are doing a similar thing with 420. It is already a symbol of cannabis culture. So, in the spirit of the age, i.e., cultural appropriation, all we have done is decided to make it an important time, date, and number in our religion. It’s still yours, but it’s ours too now. Elevationists.org 2021

Furthermore, one of their main objections is to break down the “Cheech and Chong stereotype.” Elevationists are actively trying to reframe these negative stereotypes into positive ones that celebrate artists and professionals.

Local visitors and out-of-state tourists enjoy the brightly colored historic building and currently boasts a 4.9-star rating with over 1,468 reviews on Google, which is incredibly impressive considering how online review systems operate. Visitors often either loved or hated the light show itself. For example, Eric commented: “The whole experience was above expectations. The music was dope, and the meditation really made me think about how great life truly is.” Echoing his sentiment, Zandrea said: “Whoever created this masterpiece is a true artist. This was my first visit to Denver, and hands down, it
was the absolute best thing to see! They have some references to marijuana consumption, but it’s not overwhelming. It’s the perfect amount. I love this!”

Others were unimpressed with the show's high cost and the pushy volunteers who seemingly demanded donations to enter the space itself despite its church designation. Online reviews that were critical of the experience included, “25 bucks is pretty pricey for a light show on Windows Media Player,” “was advertised as a light show, but there are NO lasers, it’s just a projection using several home theatre beamers,” and “I wasn’t impressed with the light show at all.” One tourist even went so far as to say, “with some effort, you can throw a better spiritual party in your garage…didn’t go all the way to create an EXPERIENCE worthy of its name, for example, fill the floors with pillows, glitter and glass marbles.”

Since the use of cannabis is restricted (Colorado Clean Air Act) for use during most days, visitors may either become disappointed, or relieved, to know that cannabis cannot be consumed within the building except for members. Tourists are often looking for the experience of consuming cannabis within a cannabis church, and therefore some may feel the experience was average or falsely advertised. Others, who consider themselves religious, were happy to see that cannabis consumption wasn’t in their face or being proselytized to them in some form. Regardless, the International Church of Cannabis is one of Denver’s premier cannabis cultural stops, and with its outstanding reviews by locals and tourists alike, it’s safe to say it may become a more permanent fixture of how cannabis has changed the cultural landscape.

For an explanation of a typical experience one might have when attending a light show at the International House of Cannabis, the below Fieldwork entry may give insight into a typical experience of “going to church.”

Fieldwork Journal 8/16/2020 International Church of Cannabis: My partner and I pull up to a large building, “OK, we’re here!” The building looks like most “old” Colorado buildings do- red brick with minimal decorations. This building, however, was heavily decorated with added accessories. It had rainbow flags flying outside and a large white banner loudly pronouncing “International Church of Cannabis.” We pose for a few selfies before walking up the flight of steps leading to the bulky double
front door and enter. Once in, I’m surprised to see there is a desk and a person sitting behind it. “Are you here for the show?” She asks. “Um, no?” I said, confused. “I had no idea there were shows going on.” “yes, there is one starting at 1:20,” she says, “tickets are 25$” K, and I look at each other worriedly, forty dollars to walk inside of a church? I thought to myself. “And what if we just want to see the church?” “20 dollars,” she says. K and I look at each other and shrug, “guess we’re going to the light show,” as we both awkwardly laugh and hand over the debit card. Once we pay for the tickets, our host takes us up a set of stairs to the left, up into the church. To be honest, I hadn’t realized that the church could actually be up a flight of stairs, making the experience a bit more mystical. As we reach the top of the stairs, we enter into a completely dark room, like in a concert. We fumbled our ways to find our seats, disrupting the few who sat inside. The show started out with eight minutes of what was called “meditation” breathing exercises mixed with self-help-quotes “judge people by their questions, not their answers” says a distinguished male voice, then the music starts “Don’t You Want Somebody to Love” begins, then a matrix quote booms on the speaker, warning the audience, “This is your last chance. After this, there is no turning back. You take the blue pill - the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill - you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit-hole goes,” and with that, Alice in Wonderland-themed images start to appear all over the walls and ceiling. At this point, I can roughly make out that I am sitting in a large room with windows all the way around coming to a pulpit- as I look closer, I see three large screen TVs in the back of where the pulpit would stand. The pews are still there, with the backs empty of bibles. Then the strobe lights start. “all you have to do is decide what to do with the time you have,” says another ominous voice. Colors and images flow all around the walls and ceiling- endless images that resemble screensavers on computers- abstract and geometric twisting and turning of colors and images, white owls turning different colors and flying in slow motion with iconic soft rock ballads blasting in the background. After a solid twelve minutes of the light show, I can tell I’m getting a bit antsy, “it’s a little like staring at the computer screen wallpaper,” I whisper to K, who already has his smartphone out and is scrolling through the news headlines. I take this time to observe others around the room whom I can barely make out because of the light changes. I count that there are eleven other people in the room, not bad for a Tuesday at 1:30 pm, I think to myself. The show continues with tropes of 70’s stoner culture mixed with generation Z graphics but slowly comes to fruition with longer quotes and more targeted spiritual messages. The voice booms, “Here’s to the crazy ones, the misfits, the rebels, the troublemakers, the round pegs in the square holes... the ones who see things differently — they’re not fond of rules... You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify or vilify them, but the only thing you can’t do is ignore them because they change things... they push the human race forward, and while some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius, because the ones who are crazy enough to think that they can change the world, are the ones who do.” I laugh, thinking about the irony of the fact that they used billionaire Steve Jobs’ Apple commercial campaign quote as spiritual literature for cannabis communities. After the quote, the song “when your strange” starts to play, and the music and the voices get incredibly loud “....Jesus, Mohammed... This is not faith. This is fanaticism. It knocked an ongoing struggle... it goes hand in hand with doubt” After, this is also
when things turn into multicultural archetypes with African tribal heads bopping along with the music. The mood turns back to Pink Floyd’s “Is There Anybody Out There,” which ends the show on a slow and unceremonious note. The music and the lights fade, and we are all sitting in the silent darkness. I hear a man shuffling to the computer as he says unenthusiastically, “well... that’s the show. You can take pictures now.” We all kind of open our eyes as the brightness is pungent after sitting in the dark for half an hour. Everyone whips out their smartphones to capture the rainbow murals painted all over the walls and ceilings. They are geometric rainbow designs and geometric portraits of different animals. I can make out an image of a bear, and a ram, and two human-animal hybrid beings on the back walls. Everyone snaps their pictures and selfies and then shuffles down, past the front desk, to the bottom floor that houses various sitting areas with interactive cannabis art, sculptures, and other various interesting pieces. Everyone is taking their pictures for social media around the room as the objects are meant to be played with and looked at. We admire the arcade room, the old coke vending machines, and local artwork before feeling mentally exhausted. K looks at me, does a yawn-stretch, and says, “Let’s go. I can’t wait to eat snacks at Costco.”

The above fieldnote is the researcher's personal experience while attending a tourist-geared light show at the International Church of Cannabis. It gives a first-hand account of what one might see and hear on any given day when visiting.

**Art Functionals**

Before legalization, cannabis users would often frequent “head shops” where any rendition of the word cannabis was illegal to mention within its doors. In illegal states, head shops, or tobacco shops, often have large signs warning individuals that they are on camera and that all of the products in the store are made for “tobacco-use only.” The social taboo of walking into a head shop pre-legalization was also damaging to people’s reputations. For some, if the wrong person saw you entering or leaving the establishment, social consequences could be imposed, similar to other illicit businesses, porn clubs, bars/clubs, cigar rooms, etc.

The stigma surrounding head shops even carried into the new millennia. In 2003 a major blow hit the glass blowing community when it came to pipes sold in these establishments. The US government sought to take down the illicit industry by issuing a nationwide investigation into head shops across the
nation. Many shop owners during that time were arrested and faced with various charges of selling drug paraphernalia (Bergeron 2018). During this time, many glassblowers decided to move on into new positions and left glass blowing altogether.

Pipe making has been long stigmatized in the glass community and has remained a subculture until the advent of legal cannabis. Like other periphery markets, glass blowing has seen a recent economic boom and renewed interest after legalization. Glass blowing artists even migrated to legal states, like Colorado, to seek an open market for their wares. Origins of glass pipes can be traced back to traveling music festivals around the United States with bands like the Grateful Dead (now Dead & Company) and Phish. On these tours, glass blowers would supply pipes to the crowd while also trading ideas and techniques with other glass artists along the way, creating a sort of silk road of glass-blowing paraphernalia.

Cannabis art has continued to expand from sub-culture to normative culture and is culturally revered in the cannabis community in Colorado. Cannabis tours and guides often impress their clients with the level of artistry in glass pipes currently sold in the market. Some tour companies even hire glass blowers to perform live outdoor sessions for tourists so they can see a pipe being made live. However, the crème de la crème of the industry can be found at Illuzion Glass Gallery as it is one of the most popular stops on tourist cannabis buses and is often overlooked by the typical tourist (Illuzionglassgalleries.com n.d.). Sitting along north Broadway in the Green Mile, Illuzion is situated between swanky restaurants with garage doors, vintage shops, and tattoo parlors. If you called this place a “head shop,” you would be dead wrong. This store is categorized as a glass art gallery for a good reason; much of the functional art pieces will never be used as they cost up to $100,000. The gallery displays some of the most expensive cannabis smoking pipes, also known as “functionals,” in the world. The original shop was based in Omaha, Nebraska, but the owners decided to move to Colorado to escape some of the restrictions that Nebraska had on their work. Illuzion is also a community as they publish interviews and articles on their website, highlighting artists who have products in their shop. Though a novice would have a difficult time picking up on some of the focal language displayed in the interviews as they often start with “how long
have you been on the torch” and the opinions on the difference between making glass pieces and “functionals.”

With over 3,000 pieces on display, tourists could get lost in the endless museum-like way the shop is set up. The shop is largely black on the interior, with large floor-to-ceiling glass boxes that house the glass sculptures. Some are so large they require a section or corner of their own. In the back area of the shop, there are a few glass counters with one-of-a-kind pieces that are blown by beginner, intermediate, and advanced glass artists. The pieces are reasonably priced, so tourists can purchase something during their visit, almost like a “gift shop” for the experience of seeing the museum pieces.

The Music Connection

The connection between cannabis and music is one that goes back to its beginnings as a religious medium of exploration (Ferrara 2016). A plethora of information already exists about the various connections between the two, but it would be difficult to describe cannabis tourists without touching upon the rich cultural history of music in Colorado and the people who come to hear it, and so, a section on cannabis and Colorado music should get an honorable mention.

Popular songs that can be heard frequently on the radio often combine the “West” with cannabis in their lyrics. To start, Colorado’s official state song is Henry John Deutschendorf, Jr. best known as his John Denver, who changed his name after moving to his “favorite state” and was inspired in Aspen at the age of 27 to write the song “Rocky Mountain High” (1972). The song became incredibly popular but was banned on the radio for a short time for its controversial lyric, “We all sit around the campfire, and everybody’s high, hiiiiighhh, HIIGGHHHH, rocky mountain high, Colorado.” The song has gone on to be synonymous with the Colorado “experience” long before cannabis legalization and thus serves as an adequate representation of cultural cannabis within the music genre.

Contemporary examples also exist that merge the west and cannabis. Florida Georgia Line singers Brian Kelly and Tyler Hubbard recorded the song “Colorado” in 2018 with the line, “I’ve been drunk up in the smokies on a Rocky Mountain high.” Similarly, the song “Tequila” by Dan+Shay, whose
music video was filmed in Breckenridge, Colorado, sings how he and his lover got “sky high in Colorado” (2018). Others may be more famous with Joe Walsh’s song, “Rocky Mountain Way” (1973) with the prominent opening line and funky guitar “Spent the last year Rocky Mountain way, couldn’t get much higher.”

Even flipping through the radio station between cannabis-inspired songs, one cannot escape the cannabis references; Colorado’s hit alternative rock radio station 93.3 plays a daily giveaway game at 4:20 p.m. Listener’s compete to remember three separate words, spread out over three songs, and then wait to tell them to the DJ in the correct order after all three songs are played. If they win, they get the day's giveaway. Not only does this bring in the public nature of cannabis culture, but it also brings together 4/20 as a cannabis symbol as well as the comedic stereotype of stoners as being forgetful.

Musicians themselves have started to embrace the connection to exploit their music for profit in legal cannabis industries and states. Willie Nelson sings “Roll Me Up and Smoke Me When I Die” (2012) at the same time as he sells his Willie’s Reserve strains. Wiz Khalifa (2014) can sing about getting “800 on my weed, so high I can touch the sky…marijuana minutes, nigga time slow, on a kush clock, there’s always time to smoke,” while featuring Khalifa Kush in dispensaries in California. The notorious Snoop Dogg has his own brand, Leaf’s by Snoop, which surprises… “NA, na na na” no one, as his pre-legalization song with Dr. Dre “The Next Episode” (1999) (sometimes called “smoke weed every day”) shot both into fame in the late 1990s. Even country heartthrob Toby Keith came out with his own weed endorsement with his “ode to weed” song “Wacky Tobacky” (2017), where he advises his listeners, “If you can’t take the heat son, vaporize!” Lady Gaga has also been in the works for a cannabis brand, and her last album released the song “A-Yo” (2016), which is her own version of cannabis lyrical expression. The music video shows her shimmying in a pink cowboy hat and leather fringe jacket while singing, “I can’t wait to smoke them all, whole pack like a Marlboro, blow it in your face…A-yo we smokin them all!” As these illustrations show, musicians have been diversifying their portfolios to incorporate cannabis as part of the music brand and music as part of their cannabis brand.
It should come as no surprise then that Colorado also boasts its very own music mecca for hard-core music and cannabis fanatics alike. Red Rocks Amphitheater sits on the foothills of the front range in Morrison, Colorado (10 miles from Denver) and is composed of, well, large red rocks created over 200-million years ago (Redrocksonline.com 2021). Oh, and it's high, very high. Red Rocks sits at 6,460 feet above sea level, with views to Kansas on a good night. John Brisbane Walker was the original founder of the site, who came across the rock formations in the early 1900s and noticed the unique acoustical sounds that were created from the sound waves bouncing between the rock formations. He later invited local musicians to come to sing at the site for impromptu concerts and hosted vibrant song-filled church services there as well. Denver Parks and Recreation bought the original site and surrounding land and started creating an official modern-day amphitheater in 1936 (Sylte 2019). The concert venue has hosted all the “greats” in music history, from the Beatles in 1964 to Hendrix in 1968, the Blues Brothers in 1980, Fleetwood Mac in 1987, and the list goes on. Visitors can experience the history of the venue by touring the underground museum dedicated to preserving the music culture of Colorado and the venue. The site is also highly sought after to create “live” recorded CDs and music videos for contemporary artists. Dave Matthews, Blues Traveler, Zac Brown Band, U2, and Train have shot music footage and documentaries at the venue. The importance of the structure even has reached other forms of appreciation as its physical beauty in itself has been showcased in television programs like the Simpsons, The Amazing Race, and Dr. Quinn Medical Woman (Sylte 2019; Redrocksonline.com 2021).

For some, the real cultural significance lies in Red Rocks’ role in musical rites of passage for both the bands who play there, as well as the music fans that attend. This rite of passage is especially meaningful within the context of Jam Band culture. The exact definition of a jam band may not exist, but the themes can help one identify the subgenre. The sound takes its shape from heavy guitars, southern rock beats, and shared improvisational creation of music (similar to Jazz). Bands like Umphrey’s McGee, String Cheese Incident, and Widespread Panic are similar fanatical sects of the Jam Band “religion” that often play the venue with their onslaught of migrating fans. Colorado has also birthed several nationally
touring Jam Bands within the state due to their influence on Colorado youth, such as The String Cheese Incident, Leftover Salmon, The Samples, and the Yonder Mountain String Band.

Jam Band culture originated on the heels of the beat movement, spearheaded by Jean-Louis Lebris de Kérouac (aka Jack Kerouac) in the last half of the 1900s. This period was often characterized by increased social activism, “free” societies, and experimentation with intoxicating drugs. For the beat generation, drugs became “used as a vehicle for their dissension against the banality of the bourgeois society in which they lived” (Booth 2015, 234). The counterculture movement rooted itself as a rebellion against capitalism, spiritual stagnation, and the spreading of consumer culture. Beatniks found themselves rebelling against normative culture and the normative workday, often living a nomadic lifestyle as a self-imposed exile. Lee explains: “To smoke pot in those days was to take sides, to affiliate with an underground community of unlike-minded people” (Lee 2012, 67). Kerouac and the beat culture also influenced Bob Dylan, a fan of the cannabis experience, who would go on to write many songs about his experience smoking and being intoxicated. From the beat culture would also emerge the most famous Jam Band titan in the industry, the Grateful Dead lead by Jerry Garcia, who had his own colorful history with cannabis and is considered a foundational cannabis culture hero within the community (Lee 2012, 92).

Themes taken from the beat generation continue to live within jam band culture. Collective music within Jam Bands has fostered “safe spaces” for people to experiment with various types of drugs. For bands such as Phish and the Grateful Dead, getting high on cannabis has become a communal ritual that is an “essential, almost eucharistic, part of their musical experience” (Hudak 2016, 102) Jam bands have fostered steady homeostasis between healthy experimentation, shared experiences, and music. As Booth expounds, “in the domain of the hippy, marijuana smoking was a social activity. Joints were shared. There was a certain thrill not only from the effects of the drug but also from participating in an illegal group activity. Marijuana formed a fraternal bond” (Booth 2015, 260). Venues like Red Rocks knew very well what booking these acts would mean when it came to fanatical crowds. Even pre-legalization, Red Rocks had always taken a relaxed approach to drugs during Jam Band events, especially when it came to
cannabis as John Wenzel, a local journalist, explains about the Colorado venue, “no one thinks twice about the surge of tie-dyed shirts and skunky aroma of weed at most public events” (Wenzel 2019). The trust held within jam band culture allows venues to ease up on drug restrictions during those concerts. Other genres of music that play at Red Rocks may not be afforded the same luxury.

In Denver, dispensaries and local economies prepare for the onslaught of fans and capitalize on their popularity to sell cannabis. Wezel elucidates by saying, “When Phish comes to town, my phone is blowing up with texts from (cannabis) dispensaries selling me a Phish-related strain,” he said. “It makes sense because you’ve got people flying in from out of town for this. The beer business, the camping businesses, and dispensaries are all circling these weekends on their calendars and saying, ‘How do we target this market of fans?’” (Wezel 2019)

It’s not just the private sector either. The City of Denver also attempts to capitalize and target this specialized music market. The visitor’s bureau creates a yearly website highlighting the Jam Band counterculture with the page “Jam Band Summer in Denver” that lists various music venues, eateries, and bars that tourists can look into. Relix editor Budnick explains the underlying connection behind the music, cannabis, and Colorado when saying, “There’s a real ethos of people who make their way out to Colorado, or who were raised and just stayed there, that involves searching for something a little challenging, headier and not quite as mainstream,” (Wezel 2019).

Advertising Colorado Cannabis

Advertising and marketing companies are not exempt from Colorado cannabis regulations. Referring to the Colorado Retail Marijuana Regulations document (2017), private cannabis companies cannot use television, radio, print media, internet advertising, pop-up internet advertising, or any other form of public or private advertising unless there is “reliable evidence” to suggest that at least 70 percent of the audience of such media are over the age of 21. Outdoor advertising by private companies is prohibited, including billboards, vehicles, handheld leaflets, fliers, or anything given out to a member of the public in a public arena. In addition, advertising content cannot target individuals outside the state of
Colorado nor contain child-associated signage (like cartoon characters) that might appeal to minors. Though some products are tested for adulterants and THC levels, dispensaries are proscribed from advertising that their products are safe to consume or safe due to the fact that the dispensary has tested them. Dispensaries also cannot assert that any of the products are safe for public consumption (Retail Marijuana Regulations 2017).

Marketing of Cannabis has still been readily apparent as companies are eager to capitalize on profits during high consumption seasons and market-led holidays. Marketing increases in the month of April, as national cannabis day is often celebrated on April 20th. Companies have gotten highly creative with their marketing tactics as coded messages and innuendos dominate advertisements. For example, Denny’s tweet on April 20th simply announced: “Some of our favorite words: baked, cooked, fried, stewed, and toasted.” Totino’s pizza rolls used the hashtag “#betterwhenbaked” on 4/20, with tag lines such as “remember before you forget, it’s high time for some pizza rolls, its pizza, in a roll, whoa!” Ben and Jerry’s advertisements encourage their customers to get “half baked and enjoy a great big bowl this 4/20… of ice cream of course” (Judkins 2016; Holcombe 2017). Marketing in the form of coupons for cannabis products and commercial food products in April are also common, as Colorado allows dispensaries to use and distribute coupons through various online and print outlets, which is unique to the industry as other legal markets have banned the use of coupon advertisements (Judkins 2016; Holcombe 2017).

Marketing Capitalist Industry as a Moral Enterprise

Over the last few decades, there has been increased interest in the morality of production and consumption at a branding level within the private sector (Bryant and Goodman 2004; Andrle 2017; Dolan 2007). Society has been pushing to clean up “dirty” economies by harnessing social movements and internet technologies to put pressure on socially contested industries like prostitution, gambling, oil, and firearms (Mosse 2005). Consumers have been demanding companies become more “moral” in their business practices with the lingering threat of boycotting immoral commodities as a protest.
One academic definition of moral economy speaks to this phenomenon of making markets more “moral” in terms of public perception and production/consumption practices. One historical example of this can be seen in the fair-trade industry, where Dolan (2007) concluded that moral values were a key player in the consumption of fair-trade products. Through the act of shopping for fair-trade products, Dolan noticed that consumers enjoyed knowing that their individual purchasing choice of a fair-trade product allowed them to think of themselves as partaking in a “moral” form of capitalism. This feeling of obligation allowed the consumer to picture themselves as agents in a transformative process of moralizing economies, whereby they felt that they as consumers were taking on an active role in alleviating inequalities caused by modern-day capitalism (Dolan 2007, 239-41).

Likewise, the Colorado cannabis community has tried to follow similar branding strategies started by the organic food market to reframe the “dirty” image of the drug market into a positive industry for the consumer. The cannabis economy has seen a plethora of morally positioned consumer products and services, including organic dispensaries, ethically sourced edibles, no-pesticide flower products, and charity events hosted by cannabis companies (Sommers 2017; Dolan 2007). Branding of cannabis as a “natural” pharmaceutical by the medical marijuana industry has also helped moralize the industry away from connections with processed or chemically produced illegal substances. The argument that cannabis is natural, and therefore less harmless and risky has helped cannabis cultivate a “safe” and “clean” image. Consumers have yet to counter-argue that other botanical and natural substances such as castor beans, hemlock, and nightshade are also “natural organic” substances that are fatally poisonous to human beings, or the fact that many concentrated include high levels of carcinogenic solvents (Caulkins et al. 2016, 121-22).

The cannabis community has also come out as a strong supporter of environmental responsibility and sustainability in terms of production to help align the industry in a positive light. Legalized indoor grows account for about 1 percent, or roughly $6 billion, of the total electricity nationally, but cannabis companies have been trying to get this number even lower. As more companies begin to grow and expand, many in the industry are worried about environmental degradation with large-scale cannabis
production. (Companies have tried to avoid this problem by creating sustainability workgroups that promote organic growing, less water use, and offer an annual cannabis sustainability symposium to troubleshoot issues. The technology of cannabis grow houses are constantly being re-imagined to account for improvements in air filtration, water use, chemicals and pesticides, and evolving technologies (Economist 2016b; Andrle 2017). This rebranding effort centers on normative moral frameworks and seeks to change the way the public and possible future consumers in other markets emotionally feel about buying cannabis products.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs have been incorporated into brand identities to help aid the positive transformation of a once-taboo market. One highly visible form of CSR can be seen by the public alongside major roads across the state via the “Clean Colorado” highway program. The program harnesses private businesses to be sponsors of 5-mile sections of certain highways across Colorado. With each section, 2.5 bags of beer cans, construction material, plastic, and cardboard are cleaned from the roadways that accumulate due to national truck routes (Auslander 2020). Dispensaries can opt into the program by paying $350-$500 depending on the county, which gains them access to free roadside marketing with the sponsorship road sign, a loophole in the cannabis marketing restrictions imposed by the state. This may account for the fact that cannabis dispensaries and canna-business account for 66 percent of all the highway miles sponsored under the entire Clean Colorado program (Ricciardi 2020).

Many officials, including Pitkin County, are uncomfortable with seeing the slew of paid advertisements for dispensaries in public areas. Patty Clapper from Pitkin County says, “they’re too big, and they're promoting marijuana” (Auslander 2020). Many counter-argue that if the dispensaries did not participate, then there would be more trash on the roads, leaving residents the difficult choice between trash or cannabis marketing. One resident of Pitkin Country said, “the money made from marijuana is put to something good, like keeping roads and transportation that everyone uses (Auslander 2020). Different from Adopt-a-Highway that uses actual volunteers to clean up twice a year, the Clean Colorado program
helps “it presents marijuana stores in a positive light” with a simple donation rather than physical commitment (Ricciardi 2020).

**Conclusion**

Cannabis tourism has been a colossal economic surge to the Colorado economy, and is encouraged by both the public and private sector. Since tourism is one of Colorado’s largest economic powerhouses, it is logical that the state would also encourage cannabis tourism along with other forms of tourism. The Colorado economy has incorporated the theme of cannabis into its marketing schemes for leisure activities, food and cultural events, and large-scale cannabis celebrations. Regardless, this assimilation into existing industries for tourism and consumption seems to be working as Colorado’s economy has been highly competitive on a federal scale; Colorado has ranked first in economic stability and growth between the years of 2014 and 2017 based on state GDP, with projected growth for the years to come. (U.S. News 2019). However, it is yet to be seen if the surge in cannabis tourism will continue to be sustainable once federal efforts pass. It is also yet unclear as to how future marketing in the industry will be resolved and if the positive reframing of the cannabis industry through environmentally conscience production measures and CSR initiatives will help.
CHAPTER EIGHT:
CONCLUSION

The benefits to the discipline of applied anthropology are numerous as this research will provide an anthropological perspective on a liminal il/legal industry that has yet to be fully explored by the discipline. This research benefits the discipline in providing an introductory framework to look at the cannabis industry and explore topics in economic anthropology in a newly formed market system. The research also benefits applied anthropology by giving an ethnographic example of commodity research in an ever-changing market that has yet to solidify regulation and production, and, importantly, rights and acceptable working conditions for employees. Information gathered during research might be used to help state and national governments create more informed legislation. This goes for Colorado and other states at the state level, as well as any efforts at decriminalization or legalization at the federal level. It may benefit other states who are looking to legalize cannabis and are unaware of some of the structural and social issues surrounding the industry. The value of having an anthropologist take part in the early years of legal cannabis research will be important as economists, capitalists, and legislators may overlook key cultural phenomena resulting in actions that may have unintended consequences that could have been avoided with anthropological insight.

This ethnographic dissertation has sought to explain how cannabis has transitioned from an illegal commodity chain into a hybrid economic system, highlighting the need for federal legalization to fix structural discrepancies and allow for safety and regulation to be discussed on a national scale. Until state governments and political institutions fully legalize cannabis as a commodity, the agricultural product straddles the line between legal and illegal economies, creating one form of "il/legal" marketplace of cannabis production and consumption (2007, xxvii). The overview of cannabis production and
consumption within Colorado serves as an experiment in economic structural transitions and shows how relationships, both with the commodified product and each other, are equally transformed in the process.

The ethnography began by providing a framework for theorizing Colorado's unique cannabis market system by exploring Denver, Colorado's unique cultural history, to answer the research question of where the historical and legislative decisions led to this moment in history in Colorado. Colorado's imagined community is based on symbolic ideologies of freedom, abundant wealth provided by nature, and political legislation's pioneering nature. These ideals are readily apparent in the local imagined community of Coloradans and serve as the basis for cannabis reform and the re-framing of cannabis regulation in a normative view. These historical relics also re-emerge alongside commodity festivals such as 4/20 in the notorious Civic Center Park, built to symbolize civilization amongst the wilderness. Cannabis consumers happily partake in celebrating the "freedom" of consumption festivals at Civic Center Park alongside statues of buffalo, gold miners, and bucking broncos, mere steps away from the Capitol building itself. This cultural history also repeats itself in current socio-political conversation as well, with migrant budtender migrant directly reflecting those of the early settlers who flocked in the thousands to hit it rich in the gold rush, now turned green rush.

After exploring historical factors in legalization, the ethnography investigated critical literature and theory when conceptualizing a political economy of cannabis in Colorado. This chapter laid the groundwork in forming a labor theory of value along newly formed il/legal commodity chains, which was then applied specifically to the position of drug dealer turned budtender. Commodities often transition between economic frameworks. In the case of cannabis, it can be used both as a symbolic form of distinction and value and for its use-value as a medical substance. Cannabis can be seen to enjoy a robust social life in the il/legal market; it can be gifted to friends as presents or signs of a close, trusting relationship, bartered for other products and services, or sold as a commodity on the shelves or the streets of Denver, Colorado. In an illegal market system previous to legalization, there existed relationships of cooperation between producers, distributors, and consumers, which redistributed the wealth among various stops along the commodity chain. In the newly formed il/legal market system in Colorado, labor
profits are redistributed directly to licensed cannabis dispensary owners while labor positions such as trimmers and budtenders are only awarded hourly minimum wage despite creating the commodities value. This leads labor positions within the industry to seek alternative modes of income, often culminating in the redirection of legal cannabis into illegal market systems. Therefore, both the legal and illegal economic systems work alongside each other, and often in tandem, with tourists and budtenders at the center of these economic relationships.

State regulation of capitalist enterprises was discussed in chapter four and outlined the basics of the cannabis commodity chain from seed to sale under vertical integration, showing how a "weed" plant could be miraculously transformed into a myriad of commodities that fit various individual's needs and lifestyles. Many of these products serve as symbolic forms of social and cultural capital by the judgments created surrounding cannabinoid ratios, structure, smell, size, and taste. Many times, cannabis value is not within the object itself but is artificially created by the testing facilities, dispensaries, and budtenders, who create value judgments on the quality, look, or special benefits of the specific strain of cannabis that led to its exchange. From there, these commodified products can turn into luxury goods that were not available in illegal markets. For example, concentrated forms of cannabis products were being newly created and dispensed within the medical marijuana market and were sold for higher prices than typical cannabis flower. These products now dominate the market and can only be found within legal counties due to production costs, leading to their scarcity in the illegal market. These commodities also create markets of knowledge that require technical information necessary to extract cannabinoids at appropriate heat levels. Commodified products and extractions are even combined with each other to create super-luxury commodities that are specifically targeted to tourists and cannabis enthusiasts to help satisfy their consumer needs to constantly be searching for the newest highest-valued product on the market. These purchases are again tied back to the budtender who has industry-based knowledge on which of the hundreds of products are "good" to buy, creating value in the form of service and recommendations. Since consumers cannot taste or consume cannabis products within dispensaries themselves, they are at the mercy of the budtender to tell them about products that may be of use-value to them.
Multiple quasi-legal market systems are being used simultaneously in different parts of the country, which have had vastly different social outcomes emerging from different structures and populations. Colorado's vertical integration system, as outlined in chapter 4 and 5, allowed the medical marijuana market to fill a niche within a specific marketplace in Colorado without opening the industry up to unregulated capitalist enterprises. These small-scale businesses were intentionally kept small due to the requirement of singular commodity production chains, thus limiting a free market of an exchange. Budtenders in these singular commodity chains also took on additional roles and shaped industry standards and regulations by partaking in various levels of the production process. With the advent of recreational, neoliberal capitalism, budtender positions became highly segmented and created an illusion of "moving up" in the industry. In actuality, these newly created dispensary positions were just segmented forms of labor that alienated the budtenders from the commodities that they sold and consumed. This allowed companies to segment the production and exchange process and keep industry knowledge within production categories to create an illusion of upward mobility.

In order to explain the nature of the Colorado cannabis market system, the dissertation included an overview of how the industry has shifted since legalization, taking into account the transition of cannabis from a medical commodity into a recreational commodity. It also outlined barriers to the medical marijuana market and the dichotomies found between medical and recreational cannabis. This section provides a visual representation of how capitalism changes the experience for both workers and consumers in the industry. In medical markets, patients are often led through the dispensary experience in tightly controlled paths mimicking a clinical medical experience. With the switch to recreational cannabis, this brand identity no longer served the purpose of the use of recreational cannabis and has been slowly transforming into an entertainment experience. Recreational dispensaries are now being built that allow the freedom of movement of consumers within the dispensary and also have cleaner, more approachable branding structures that are familiar and depersonalized.

After having laid the groundwork for the legal cannabis system in Colorado, an in-depth ethnographic account of the everyday lives of Denver budtenders illuminating the occupational and
economic difficulties working within a federal il/legal industry. Budtender's experiences on working in the industry were presented to give the reader an overview of who budtenders are and how difficult it is to financially survive as a budtender in the industry. Budtenders embody the concept of the bricoleur, as they are comprised of various collaged pieces of previous professional occupations that are disassembled into pieces and then reassembled in the form of a budtender, as evidenced by its patchwork name and indistinct job roles within the industry itself. In this way, the budtender is restricted from creating a new profession within the recently created marketplace, but is confined by social conceptions that already exist in the culture in which it is created (Levi-Strauss 1962). Barriers to entry, abject poverty, dispensary regulations, taxes, and consumption practices hinder capital accumulation for many budtenders. The badging process itself represents not only a physical and economic barrier to entry into legalized markets, but it also acts as a form of identity, symbolized by the color of the badge in relation to the amount of power and agency one has within the dispensary, and loosely associated with a social class outside the dispensary walls. The badge also serves as a symbol of insider/outsider relations, and with a quick flash of a badge in another dispensary, the wearer opens secret “insider discounts” that are not advertised to the public. Hearing from the budtenders themselves introduced the reader to the lived experience of a budtender and the difficulties faced when trying to maintain financial stability in a newly created market that is yet to be nationally recognized. Due to the secrecy and inconsistency of cannabis markets nationally, it was important to uncover some of the more culturally ambiguous aspects of the budtender position to help clarify standard budtender etiquette and expectations of consumer behavior within a cannabis dispensary.

To answer the question of how cannabis is consumed in the tourist setting, the cultural tourism experience was further explored, identifying key factors in the production of cannabis tourism, cannabis adjacent commodity sectors, and market-led holidays. Cannabis-inspired events bring in revenue for both the industry and the state. This sometimes comes in the form of creating new holidays or encouraging the incorporation of newly framed cannabis commodities into existing business models. Micro-communities that once were considered social taboo have also found new freedoms and status in the legal market. It
was shown that participatory cultural productions attract visitors to celebrate cannabis as a community (in Colorado specifically) and have become integrated into the state's tourist landscape. Since tourism has been an important economic sector in history, it comes as no surprise that the state has decided to capitalize on cannabis tourism to increase revenue. Free market capitalism has allowed cannabis to expand into existing industries and also has allowed the creation of new ones in search of economic profit.

It is important to remember that the market of cannabis is rapidly changing, and the change is being created by individuals and companies who interact with structures already in place to create new versions that will be revised through time. This will provide current illegal states and the federal government valuable information to improve on the structure of the industry and future policy recommendations. This fits nicely with an anthropological point of view of commodity exchanges, as often they build on the symbolic socio-cultural exchange of objects that form value systems governed by politics.

Legal cannabis economies in the United States provide a transitionary framework for studying il/legal commodities. Within the theoretical framework of political economy, the strategic dialogue between classic interpretations of economic theory and the need to regulate commodity chains within il/legal markets can help uncover how object commodification changes societal relations. Socio-cultural change is increasingly important at the state level as the future of legality within the United States and abroad will depend heavily on the cannabis market experiment currently taking place in Colorado. These new cannabis exchange mechanisms and economic relationships have much yet to teach us about changing societal structures and social change.

**Anthropological Political Economy and Commodity Chain Analysis**

This ethnography serves as an anthropological commodity chain analysis from the political economy perspective that traces three different distribution markets of cannabis consumption in Colorado. It is important to note that not all commodity chain analysis is from a perspective of political economy,
with the opposite also being true in that political economy is not exclusively interested in a commodity chain analysis. This ethnography has sought to show the commodity chain analysis, from seed to sale, under a political economy framework. Similar to Mintz and Tsing's work that traces single commodities through time and space to uncover the relationships and categories that exist along the chain from production to consumption, so too does this ethnography look at how cannabis transitions through commodity-hoods and is restricted and constrained by historical, political, and social processes that govern its production and exchange.

The work presented is also a new contribution to the literature in that the commodity analyzed not only operates within a market in transition but is also a commodity stuck in limbo between market systems, waiting for new fully legal markets to open. Therefore, Nordstrom’s concept of il/legalility is most apt to describe the limbo in which cannabis is now held until federal legalization allows for a complete transition into a fully legal commodity. This adds not only to the study of illegal commodity chains in transition but outlines the process of how illegal products turn into legal ones through the political economy. This idea of a commodity stuck in transition, and the attention to how consumption in many ways dictates production through dialectical feedback between consumers and producers is new to the study of commodities within anthropology.

Likewise, the position of budtenders is also an interesting shift to the discussion of labor. Budtenders can also be seen as the commodity equivalent of a person in transition, as drug dealers turn into budtenders and then onto new labor forms in a future federally legalized marketplace. But unlike the objects that they produce and consume, budtenders feel the negative effects of being a laborer in a transitionary economy. Often, they are thought of easily replaceable uneducated labor, and therefore, are not given workplace protections. Here as well, there seems to be a dialectical relationship between big business who sees them as replaceable labor and budtenders who respond to the lack of protections and living wage by leaving the industry altogether. Until budtenders are seen as valuable within the commodity chain and therefore given more protections and increased wages to keep retention within dispensaries, this underlying problem will continue to exist.
It is my aim to provide a voice for the budtenders who are being unfairly taken advantage of due to cannabis' il/legal status. While completing this dissertation, the informant's views and opinions on the conclusions were sourced for accuracy in the analysis. Though they might not have the theoretical knowledge and background, the majority of them seem to be aware of their exploitation of labor, as evidenced by our many conversations. Out of 33 of the budtenders interviewed, only 14 still currently work in the industry as budtenders. Some have left the state, others transitioned back into their previous positions before being a budtender, and others have gone back to trade school to increase their future opportunities. After leaving the industry, many ex-budtenders were satisfied with their choice to exit from the industry. Informants mentioned that they enjoyed having a fixed working schedule, workplace benefits and didn't have to rely on daily tip money to pay for food. For many, reflecting back on their experiences led them to be more introspective on how difficult the job had actually been.

It has been shown that cannabis exists in three commodity chain markets that overlap and depend on each other for their survival. The black, medical, and recreational markets all have distinct commodity chains that are often linked with one another and governed by state and local actors. The commodity chains of cannabis have dramatically changed since decriminalization as producers are now coming from within the United States, such as Colorado, rather than the product is sourced and imported from outside of the country as an imported substance. This previous production cycle mirrors Wallerstein's center-periphery analysis of commodities in that the global north (developed markets) depended on these illegal commodities being produced and imported from global south countries (developing markets), with the surplus-value of profits being kept mainly within global north countries. With the switch to legal markets within developed markets in the global north, this analysis of surplus value extraction no longer fits the center-periphery analysis.

Since cannabis was now being produced within Colorado, this led to new theories on the relationship between production and consumption along a cannabis commodity chain. This new production system led to a state-governed form of the legal market in the form of medical marijuana, where cannabis became "legally" produced and consumed by state residents. These medical consumers
were required to obtain a state-appointed medical card to consume medical cannabis commodities legally. However, market prices and lack of adequate labor wages often encouraged those working in the dispensaries and medical consumers to purchase cannabis commodities and transition them into black markets. This was partially due to the tightly controlled consumption restrictions from the state in the form of medical cards that hindered other consumers from participated in the market freely. The medical market is not only constricted in terms of consumption, but it was also purposely constrained in terms of the production process. This form of controlled production is termed vertical integration, which forces cannabis license holders to produce the products that they sell directly and to oversee the commodity chain from production to consumption. Dispensary license holders were then held responsible for meeting compliance measures along the chain and were restricted by the amount of production capital they own. This restriction in production also restricted their profits. With opposition to market restrictions coming from both consumers and dispensary owners, Colorado state opened up the restricted market and ended vertical integration in Colorado.

This is in contrast to free-market capitalism, which does not require the relationship between production and consumption to be unified under one firm, as seen in the market after the end of vertical integration in 2014. With the end vertical integration, the market opened up to recreational consumers, and dispensaries were able to buy products wholesale from companies that specialized in one-stop the production process. Therefore, dispensaries could source products from many different production centers to meet the high demands of their recreational customers that were coming from the general public within Colorado, but also from out-of-state consumers who were flooding into the state to participate in legal consumption of cannabis.

**Contributions to Anthropological Theory**

Cannabis has received a growing interest in research attention in the past decade. Numerous scholars have investigated the social history of cannabis in the form of the production and consumption of “illegal marijuana,” current literature regarding “recreational cannabis” is produced, consumed, and
exchanged has yet to become a substantive discussion from an academic perspective. Considerable research attention has been paid to the medical and chemical qualities of cannabis in general, with the vast majority of research showing the health and therapeutic effects (e.g., Hudak 2016; Caulkins et al. 2016; Popova et al. 2017; Borodovsky 2016; Compton 2017; Mathre 2012; Flach 2002; Abrams 2015; Sallan et al. 1975; Lutge 2015).

However, the vast majority of cannabis research has not been from the discipline of anthropology. This dissertation attempts to redress the imbalance by providing a political economy approach that entails the simultaneous theorization of production, distribution, exchange, consumption, and the workings of a particular market under capitalism along with a theoretical understanding of capital’s relationship with the state and state policy. In the anthropological literature on specialty crops this approach has been pursued, for example, research on wine and wine tourism (Yelvington, Simms and Murray 2012; Yelvington, Dillon-Sumner, and Simms 2014). The historical and ethnographic research reported above strongly suggests that we must start with the commodification process. This has been done by demonstrating the historical uses of cannabis and its multiple forms and shown how it became commodified in various states of illegality and legality, according to particular legal regimes through history. By combining a political economy approach to commodity chain analysis (not all commodity chain analysis is based in political economy), it has been shown how the cannabis commodity form changes in a more “telescoped” history. Cannabis in Colorado is produced under strict regulation from the state, but also, of course, profits for the cannabis capitalist industry are enabled by state policy. The state’s relationship with capital is seen as one of both subsidizing and regulating capital.

This dissertation shows how distribution and exchange in the cannabis industry are related to state-regulated structures, whether defined as being for “medical” or “recreational” use and defined as “markets.” The cannabis commodity form changes its appearance in many ways as advertising of “non-productive” labor is applied to make the commodity presentable for consumption. That is, to add value. Here the budtender plays a central role. Cannabis capital is “realized” with consumption, and the profits that appear from the exchange of money for cannabis now as a form of exchange-value are invested as
strategies to accumulate more and more (cannabis) capital. All of the value created is created by labor, with farmworkers, budtenders, and others in the industry having their labor exploited by the cannabis capitalists as the key social relation that is fundamental to the whole system. Yet, while sharing some features with capitalism elsewhere, there are aspects to cannabis capitalism in Colorado that merit particular historical and ethnographic attention. Thus, the contribution I see this dissertation making is not only that of political economy tradition on ethnography, but the ethnographic tradition’s contribution to political economy.

**Applied Interventions**

There are many approaches to applying social science to consider in a case like this. The researcher could also try and fix the system from within her own agency. This would go along with the idea that it is better to concentrate one’s energy on small battles rather than trying to topple down a large, impersonal system (winning the war). This is a more educational approach of trying to enlighten individuals as to why they are even participating in the system in the first place (capitalism, unfair social structures, poverty, etc.) and helping them to understand themselves and their life choices. This could include giving helpful information into alternative education programs, emphasize rules or laws, and encourage legal entrepreneurial activity. Conversely, this leads the researcher into “neoliberal preaching” that customers hear from other members of the community already, such as their teachers and parents. Trying to enlighten them creates situations that may be seen as patronizing, especially taking into consideration their vulnerability in the first place, the very reason why they are forced into selling marijuana illegally for profit. This may lead to resistance if not approached properly.

To help guide the researcher in determining a solution, Whiteford and Trotter (2008) suggest choosing a solution that is both most likely to prevent the problem from occurring in the first place, and also one that best matches values by maintaining confidentiality and preventing harm to participants. Following the guidelines above, it seems the best course of action is to consider the context of the situation, taking into account the long-term goals of the research, and weigh conflicting positions and
choose a corresponding course of action. When doing so, often simply doing nothing (and passively recording events) is the best solution in maintaining confidential rapport and preventing harm. This may be the best option for those who are working in illegal, or quasi-legal, sectors of the economy in places where there is a weak state or unreliable legal systems. The situation points to a basic debate within anthropology of ethical and legal issues working in illegal sectors or from top-down perspectives of unequal power (AAA 2012; Whiteford and Trotter 2008).

The “problems” that my research shows need solution are of two orders: large and small. At the large level, and making the realistic assumption that capitalism isn’t going away anytime soon, there is the question of the Colorado experience providing a model for other states seeking to legalize medical and/or recreational cannabis. A central finding of my dissertation research for applied consumption (pun intended) is that regulation plans by states need to include more guidelines and safeguards for employees in the industry. If you take the definition of anthropology to be a collaboration to find solutions to practical problems (Cobb, 2019), then this dissertation may form a roadmap of practical problems that have yet to be discussed to find practical solutions. This would include regulations that would make employment more formalized and with all of the benefits accorded to workers in other industries. But this is just a start. My research indicates the need for education and training as well as guaranteed medical insurance for industry employees. That is, to make the industry more above-board, transparent, and professional. These costs should be required to be borne by the business owners.

This leads to more specific applied recommendations on a smaller scale. Here I speak of the position of the budtenders who occupy a very precarious position in the industry. As my research has shown, the budtenders are the point of contact between the customers (or patients in the case of medical cannabis), and through their work value is added to the cannabis commodity. The research also depicts how corporations take advantage of a lack of labor rights and regulations in illegal market systems, and illuminates the consequences of ambiguous market regulation, inevitably creating systemic problems for workers along the commodity chains. Yes, as all workers who are forced to sell their labor to capitalists, they are exploited as a class. But what can be done to, if not reduce their exploitation (an impossibility,
logically and politically, under capitalism), improve their position vis-à-vis the owners of capital? My recommendation is for education and certification programs to be paid for by the employer that would provide a certification to budtenders. This sort of investment in an educated and valued labor force would also provide the budtenders with a kind of mobility that would help to ensure their value and recognition within the industry. It is towards these ends that I would like my dissertation research to speak.

The Future of Cannabis

In many ways, the cannabis economy is in itself a representation of a hybrid anthropology, combing market theory and practice. Based on economic and social theories in other industries, one can extrapolate these findings to secure a hypothesis of how the cannabis industry will evolve in the future. Central to this evolution is the transitionary period of cannabis legalization on a federal level. By the time the 2020 elections rolled around, it seemed that legal cannabis was on its way to federal legalization with both sides of the political spectrum in agreement. Measures to legalize cannabis in various states were all passed. Furthermore, easing restrictions on other illegal substances, such as psychosilocybins (like magic mushrooms), were also being widely discussed as the next step in substance decriminalization. Amongst most participants whom I interviewed, the consensus was that legalizing mushroom-based substances were the future, and many were starting to experiment with buying spore syringes online to start home grows. Many of my informants in the cannabis industry claimed it was faster and easier than weed to grow. Similar to how cannabis has started out in grey and black markets, mushroom spore syringes of “medical grade” are purchased off the internet and grown in Petri culture plates under kitchen sinks, under beds, and tucked away in closets in many Colorado homes. The cost of grey market mushrooms also matches that roughly of cannabis, making them both agricultural products of similar cost and weight.

With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, Colorado Governor John Hickenlooper issued a decree that cannabis dispensaries would be shut down. Dispensaries around Colorado saw long lines wrapped around buildings for which Disneyworld would have been jealous. The announcement caused a
mass panic throughout the state, and suddenly an issue trying to get people to stay away from each other became the reason why people were being forced together. Waiting in line myself, I listened as the debates began. Rumblings between consumers bounced between members in line, some making fun of those wearing masks, while others were chastising those for not wearing one. Emotions grew as we all waited in the cold, with everyone nervous about the impending shutdown. This day would be remembered by budtenders and consumers. Speaking with a dispensary manager recently, he recalled the event, “Man, nothing compares to that man, not even 4/20! Never ever seen anything that that before or since.” Frantic people ran to their nearest dispensary and grabbed as much as their paychecks could afford. The COVID-19 pandemic seems to have sped up the process of devaluing and eliminating the budtender position altogether, as many dispensaries immediately switched to online automated systems with no budtender interaction at all.

Cannabis as a legal commodity deserves more research attention that delves further into cannabis as a social changing catalyst rather than a health and wellness product or an illegal product. There is limited research investigating how legal recreational sales are impacting local communities and microeconomic markets. Within the field of anthropology and behavioral economy specifically, many questions remain unanswered in the case of Colorado. With the inclusion of various academic disciplines such as anthropology, behavioral economy, and political economics, further research will bridge isolated theoretical literature and disciplinary perspectives. Bringing in both qualitative and quantitative data, future studies have the potential to illuminate the variety of social relationships that govern economic transactions. Future research might also be directed to see if the Colorado experience can be operationalized and scaled for public health benefit on a national scale as well as investigating the possibility of alleviating at least some of the negative outcomes stemming from the global “war on drugs” on a national scale.
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APPENDIX I:

INTERNAL REVIEW BOARD PERMISSION

October 3, 2019

Lisa Berman
Anthropology
5131 Puritan Circle
1122
Tampa, FL 33617

RE: Expedited Study Determined Exempt at Continuing Review
IRB#: CR3_Pro0036639
Title: Cannabis Capitalism in Colorado: the anthropology of marijuana production, consumption, and regulation in a newly-legalized market

Study Approval Period: 10/3/2019

Dear Ms. Berman:

On 10/3/2019, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and APPROVED the above application and all documents contained within including those outlined below. Please note that this protocol is now approved under the 2018 Common Rule (45 CFR 46) and is now exempt. Thus, Continuing Review is no longer required and your application will be closed per USF HRPP policy.

The IRB determined that your study qualified for exempt review based on criteria for exemption in the federal regulations as outlined by 45 CFR 46.104(d):

(2) Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met: (i) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; (ii) Any disclosure of the human subjects’ responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects’ financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or (iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by 45 CFR 46.111(a)(7).

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As the principal investigator for this study, it is your responsibility to ensure that this research is conducted as outlined in your application and consistent with the ethical principles outlined in the Belmont Report and with USF HRPP policies and procedures.

Please note, as per USF HRPP policy, once the exempt determination is made, the application is closed in ARS. This does not limit your ability to conduct the research. Any proposed or anticipated change to the study design that was previously declared exempt from IRB oversight must be submitted to the IRB as a new study prior to initiation of the change. However, administrative changes, including changes in research personnel, do not warrant an Amendment or new application.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subjects research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

Melissa Sloan, PhD, Vice Chairperson
USF Institutional Review Board
APPENDIX II:

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Semi-Structured Interview of Cannabis Consumers

1. Record name, date, sex, and general physical information about informant during initial few minutes of interview
2. Where did you grow up? (if not from Colorado, why did you move here? How is Colorado Different from you home state?)
3. Tell me about your first experience buying legal cannabis from a dispensary/What made you look into buying cannabis from a dispensary/ How did you choose a dispensary?
4. Have you ever been to a 4/20 or cannabis cup event in Colorado or elsewhere? When? What was your experience like? Would you be open to attending one in the future?
5. What was the general attitude toward cannabis from your friends or family before you experimented with cannabis? Have those views changed?
6. How have your own thoughts on cannabis changed from your youth till now?
7. What do your friends and family say about your cannabis use? (then and now)
8. In what ways has your life changed since recreational legalization?
9. Do you think your behavior has changed at all since legalization? do you smoke more in public, speak more openly?
10. How do you approach the topic of cannabis use with friends? family? Has legalization changed the way you set up boundaries with friends or family?
11. Have your consumption practices changed since legalization?
12. What do you think the state could do differently regarding regulation measures?
13. How well does the state do in regulating the sales of cannabis?
14. How well does the state do in distributing profits made from the industry?
15. What should the state allow dispensaries to sell? shouldn’t?
16. What has the state been doing a good job of regarding the cannabis industry?
17. What do you think about the state’s designation of medical and recreational products?
18. What next for Colorado? What legislation might improve the industry?
19. Do you think it’s risky to be involved in the industry?
20. How legitimate do you feel the medical card system is?
21. Have you encountered cannabis tourists or marijuana migrants?
22. How do you think the economic boom has improved the state?
23. Do you think the Colorado system could work on a federal level? What would need to be changed?
APPENDIX III:
CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN INTERVIEW RESEARCH

I volunteer to participate in a research project conducted by graduate student Lia Berman from the University of South Florida. I understand that the project is designed to gather information about the changing socio-cultural climate in Colorado after recreational cannabis legalization. I will be one of approximately 30 people being interviewed for this research.

1. My participation in this project is voluntary. I understand that I will not be paid for my participation. I may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time without penalty. If I decline to participate or withdraw from the study, no one will be told.

2. I understand that most interviewees in will find the discussion interesting and thought-provoking. If, however, I feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview session, I have the right to decline to answer any question or to end the interview.

3. Participation involves being interviewed by researchers from University of South Florida. The interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes. Participant notes will be written during the interview. An audio tape of the interview will be kept for accuracy and will not be shared with anyone outside the research team.

4. I understand that the researcher will not identify me by name in any reports using information obtained from this interview, and that my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secured. Subsequent uses of records and data will be subject to standard data use policies which protect the anonymity of individuals and institutions.

5. Faculty and administrators from my campus will neither be present at the interview nor have access to raw notes or transcripts. This precaution will prevent my individual comments from having any negative repercussions.

6. I understand that this research study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Studies Involving Human Subjects: Behavioral Sciences Committee at the University of South Florida. For research problems or questions regarding subjects, the Institutional Review Board may be contacted through the IRB department at USF.

7. I have read and understand the explanation provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

8. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

____________________________ ________________________
My Signature Date____________________________ __________________
My Printed Name Signature of the Investigator

For further information, please contact: Lia Berman; LiaBerman@usf.mail.edu