

## Mainlining Along the Line: Consuming Heroin in the Great Lakes Border Region, 1945-1960

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In 1938, the widely-read Canadian publication *Maclean's Magazine* printed a story warning readers about the growth of illegal drug networks across North America. After explaining that there were as many as “8,000 dope addicts in Canada,” the article detailed a story of two Americans smuggling drugs into Ontario across the national border. According to the article, in January of that year, George De Bozy and his girlfriend crossed into Windsor, Ontario via the ferry located in Detroit, Michigan. The couple then “got into his car, which had been parked near the ferry docks, and drove off, apparently innocent tourists out to explore Canada.” A few minutes after leaving the ferry, members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police pulled them over and searched their car on the “main street of Windsor.” Under the dashboard they found 25 marijuana cigarettes and “the makings for 1,000 more in a cleverly concealed cache beneath the rear seat.” According to the article, this was not an isolated incident. Instead, it was a growing problem that, if ignored, would increasingly give “North American narcotics squads plenty to worry about.”<sup>1</sup>

By the end of the 1940s, the *Maclean's* article's prediction had indeed come to fruition: cross-border smuggling between the two countries was on the rise, and Americans and Canadians were regularly crossing the border in search of both illegal drugs to purchase and potential markets in which to sell them. Though several scholars have analysed trafficking networks that

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brought illegal drugs from Latin American, Europe, and the Middle East into North America, few studies have focused on the role that the Canada-US border played in this transnational process.<sup>2</sup> Further, studies that examine the relationship between national borders and the North American drug trade tend to focus on the US-Mexico border due to both the large volume of illegal trade across it, and a tendency within borderlands scholarship to focus on contested spaces.<sup>3</sup> This article argues, however, that there were important developments along the Canada-US border in the postwar period, ones that deserve a close examination. An attention to the flow of drugs and drug users across the ‘49<sup>th</sup> parallel’ demonstrates the way a mobile, transnational, and illegal economy was facilitated by the national line, and as a result of illicit cross-border interactions between Americans and Canadians.

As a major metropolitan border city, Detroit was linked to broader social, economic, and cultural developments in the Southern Ontario region—connections seldom explored by historians of the postwar period. This study places Detroit’s position as a border city at the forefront, tracing the connection between its local heroin market and those of Canadian cities in south-western Ontario, particularly Toronto and Windsor. In some ways, the growth of heroin use in these cities reflected larger patterns that developed across Canada and the United States following the end of the war. As scholars like Eric Schneider and Catherine Carstairs have shown, this included racial, ethnic, and geographic divisions that facilitated the growth of heroin use in African American and poor neighbourhoods. Associated in part with deindustrialization, segregation, and a growing suburban/urban divide, contemporaries across North America often viewed the growth of heroin markets as bi-products of poverty, delinquency, and the postwar ‘urban problem.’<sup>4</sup>

Yet the Detroit-Windsor corridor also provides a unique opportunity to study the heroin economy in the postwar period. Its position as a borderland urges us to consider the ways in

which this illicit market was simultaneously transnational *and* shaped by local urban geographies.<sup>5</sup> In particular, a closer attention to the using communities that developed along the national line provides important insight into the multiple and interconnected levels on which movement and mobility shaped the experiences of users and sellers. Though large-scale smugglers and transnational criminals played an important role in connecting drug markets across the Canada-US border—and received the most attention from law enforcement officials and the media—individual users and small-scale sellers were likewise on the move in the postwar years. Contemporary records indicate that there was a sizeable community of users who travelled in order to obtain drugs, mingle with fellow users, and engage in a burgeoning urban subculture that transcended the national border. The regular movement of goods and people across multiple locations, and the similarities among using communities in different locales, meant that there was a portability within the drug subculture itself, one that enabled users and sellers to participate in the heroin economies that spanned multiple city, state, provincial, and national lines. By examining the flows of goods and people across cities in the Detroit-Windsor border region, this paper traces the interconnection between drug markets and drug subcultures, arguing that both were dependant on transnational and intercity mobility.

Contemporary regulatory agents tended to view drug users' movements in reductive ways, framing them as social outcasts and transients who travelled from city to city primarily to achieve their next fix. A closer look at the motivations behind individual's drug use, though, suggests more complex incentives behind the fluidity of drug communities. As participants in what Courtwright terms 'limbic capitalism,' users and sellers created informal markets on which heroin and other illegal drugs were sold as valuable and pleasurable commodities.<sup>6</sup> While the search for heroin itself motivated men and women to cross between cities in the Great Lakes region, central to their goals were attempts to attain physical pleasure and to connect with a 'hip'

community of users in nearby urban centres. Historians have noted that one's ability to participate in conspicuous, pleasurable consumption was central to notions of freedom, social mobility, and community in the postwar period.<sup>7</sup> Reflecting what cultural theorists Kane Race identifies as a move towards “expressive, erotic, and experiential pleasures,” the postwar heroin economy likewise reflected these broader shifts in consumer culture.<sup>8</sup> Through their pursuit of pleasure, excitement, and social and geographic mobility, heroin users and sellers on both sides of the national line came to embody the central tenants of the modern consuming subject—a subjectivity that allowed men and women to engage with a broad community pursuing similar objectives.

Participants in the illegal heroin economy functioned on multiple geographic and social borders, creating alternative communities while also reinforcing larger socio-economic patterns. Internal hierarchies within the illicit market were in fact shaped by race and class inequalities—disparities central to the postwar consumerist logic itself.<sup>9</sup> The way one consumed heroin, his or her ability to make large amounts of money in the illegal trade, and the ability to evade arrest and prosecution were in many ways determined by race and class lines. Ultimately, the mobility afforded by this illicit market could also be limited by the social divides it helped to perpetuate. While it is tempting to celebrate the agency of participants in these illicit exchanges, it is also necessary to identify the ways in which this economy likewise reflected broader social divisions developing across postwar North America. The illicit drug market enabled and encouraged a sense of belonging and mobility for many users and sellers, but it did so in uneven ways, and with varying consequences for the men and women most intimately involved in the trade.

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The use of illegal drugs for recreational purposes, of course, pre-dates the postwar period, and throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Americans and Canadians engaged in the

use of a wide range of psychotropic substances. By the late-nineteenth century, opiate drugs in particular were liberally prescribed, readily attainable without a prescription, and widely used.<sup>10</sup> Despite the fact that opiates came under increasing control by federal authorities on both sides of the border during the Progressive Era, they continued to be taken for recreational purposes, and by the 1920s were among the most widely used illegal narcotics. Though the closing of international trade routes during World War II greatly disrupted drug markets across North America, and led to a temporary suppression of heroin, within a few years of the close of the war illicit drug cultures re-emerged in full force in both Canada and the United States.

Given the size of Detroit's using community, its position along the border meant that it functioned as a central hub in the heroin economy of the Great Lakes region. As a bustling American city, its user population became the fourth largest among North American cities, behind only New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago.<sup>11</sup> Law enforcement officials estimated that there were anywhere from about 2,000 to 5,000 'addicts' in the city in the mid-1950s.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, in 1955, G.B. McClellan, Assistant Commissioner of the RCMP in Toronto, estimated that the 'addict' population in Southern Ontario was between 400 and 450, with Toronto making up about ninety percent of users in the region, and Windsor and Hamilton comprising the remaining ten percent.<sup>13</sup> Though the size of the using community on the Windsor side of the border was substantially smaller than that of Detroit, it had a long history of operating as a space that connected American travellers and tourists to broader networks of illicit communities in Canada.<sup>14</sup> Its position between Detroit and Toronto meant that it played a key role in facilitating a cultural and economic link between the using communities of the two largest metropolitan areas in the region.

On both sides of the border, contemporaries associated the rise in heroin use with the economic decline that took place in city cores, and what increasingly came to be termed the

'urban problem.' For many cities in the Midwest and Golden Horseshoe in particular, the years between 1939 and 1965 were shaped by cycles of boom and bust; while industries initially expanded exponentially, suburbanization, capital disinvestment, and social and economic inequality hampered development in the region.<sup>15</sup> By the early 1950s, automation had become the standard in the auto industry, displacing thousands of workers across Canada and the United States. This was especially devastating for residents of cities like Windsor and Detroit, whose main source of employment was in industrial manufacturing.<sup>16</sup> Further, as the number of jobs declined, many residents moved from the city centres to suburbs, creating depressed markets and neighbourhoods in downtown cores. In Windsor, as "poverty pockets" developed in areas where industries were no longer operating, middle class residents moved to peripheral parts of the city, leaving low-income neighbourhoods behind.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, as scholars like Thomas Sugrue and Joe Darden have shown, Detroit experienced a significant shift in population from the city centre to its suburbs. Prosperity and poverty were again directly linked to class, race, and geography—as white workers moved to the suburbs, conditions for African American workers in particular rapidly deteriorated.<sup>18</sup> This was coupled segregated housing, a shortage of recreational facilities, and police brutality, making economic conditions for black residents all the more difficult.<sup>19</sup> As both industries and workers moved from the city centres, residents who remained in the downtown core faced increasingly volatile and difficult labour markets.

Heroin use tended to be concentrated in economically marginal urban neighbourhoods left behind in these transformations. According to the 1953 Mayor's Committee for the Rehabilitation of Narcotics Addicts, over 90% of Detroit users lived in areas that fell within the first and thirteenth precincts of the police department, areas they claimed were centres of "economic and social deprivation."<sup>20</sup> In his interview before the 1955 Senate Committee, Commissioner Nicholson, head of the RCMP, employed similar language connecting drug use

with low-income areas within Canada's major urban centres. He stated that users "had their own little group[s]," which "have some sort of hangout[s] or place[s] where they can live at a minimum cost. Further, they have to support their habit by crime, and they favour the place where they think they have the better chance of stealing; or, in the case of women, if they tend toward prostitution, they go to the centres where they can capitalize on it."<sup>21</sup> This language was reflective of a national discourse that portrayed drug users as a delinquent, marginal group of people who inhabited the "worst" parts of the postwar city.<sup>22</sup> Viewing drug use as simultaneously a criminal venture and a disease plaguing inner-cities, law enforcement and government officials continually argued that users symbolized the larger social and economic problems increasing affecting city centres.

Government officials and regulatory agents were also concerned that the heroin bought and sold in urban centres was part of a transnational market enabled by large-scale smugglers and global trade routes. This became particularly acute in spaces that functioned as the point of entry for large quantities of illegal heroin. While port cities like New York, Los Angeles, and Vancouver were among the largest sites of importation in the early postwar period, cities along the Canada-US border played key roles in connecting the markets across the two countries. Smugglers became adept at moving their products in resourceful ways, often creating secret compartments in cars or personal clothing in which they would stash the illegal goods. The compact nature of heroin meant that the illegal products could often make it through customs inspections undetected.<sup>23</sup> Contemporary customs authorities further noted that this "time honored tradition of trunk smuggling" between Canada and the US was directly linked to the effectiveness of policing at major sea ports—as policing heated up in cities like New York, the Canadian border became increasingly desirable for those smuggling drugs into the United States.<sup>24</sup>

The cities of Detroit, Windsor, and Toronto were home to several infamous large-scale smugglers whose business was successful primarily due to their ability to capitalize on cross-border business. In 1963 US Senate Subcommittee on “Organized Crime and Illicit Traffic in Narcotics” took a special interest in large-scale operations along the national border. Their investigation noted that drug markets in Detroit and Windsor were closely intertwined, with major importers and distributors regularly supply drugs across the national line. Members of local organized crime families such as Joseph “Cockeyed Joe” Catalanotti, Moises Costillo, Nicholas Cicchini, and Andrew Bottancino came under investigation by the RCMP and the FBN alike for cross-border smuggling in the late-1950s and early 1960s.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, other large-scale dealers like Peter Devlin made headlines in local papers when they were arrested for smuggling large quantities of heroin across the Detroit-Windsor border.<sup>26</sup> Another local importer, Barabara La Prad (known as “Mother Bee”) came to the attention of customs authorities for a smuggling ring based out of her Detroit boarding house. She and her son rented out several rooms to “lake workers” who brought heroin across the border in the inner tubes of spare tires.<sup>27</sup> Many contemporary newspapers reported on similar narcotics rings across the Great Lakes region including, for example, one *Saskatoon Star* article that claimed Toronto’s increase in dope addicts was due in large part to “a flourishing Detroit dope ring.”<sup>28</sup> While it is impossible to know the exact amount of heroin that crossed between Ontario and Michigan, what is clear is that there was a sizeable number of large-scale importers who used the close proximity of border cities to connect the drug markets between the US and Canada.

The national border performed a contradictory role in the cross-border heroin market of the postwar period: on the one hand it served as a site of increased regulation, while on the other it functioned as a fluid space that enabled illegal activities to take place. In this way, the heroin market was shaped by the paradoxical nature of the border itself, which operated simultaneously

as both a barrier and a crossing point.<sup>29</sup> In the Great Lakes border region, members of law enforcement at the municipal, state, provincial, and federal levels worked closely to monitor the flow of illegal goods, and attempted to aid one another as often as possible. The Commissioner of Customs for the US regularly had officers stationed in Canada who worked closely with Canadian officials in order to reduce illegal smuggling. While these officers did not focus exclusively on narcotics, they did work closely with Canadian customs officials on drug issues whenever necessary.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, the RCMP had a liaison officer stationed in Washington D.C. who regularly met with “all enforcement agencies in the United States,” including frequent meetings with the FBN on joint problems.<sup>31</sup> Canadian and American authorities touted the close working relationship between enforcement officials on each side of the border, and recognized the need for cooperation if they were going to be successful at stemming the flow of illegal goods between their respective countries.

Yet the high volume of traffic that passed through inspection centres, and the expansive length of the border itself, also made it possible for smugglers to slip through enforcement attempts.<sup>32</sup> This was particularly true in the Detroit-Windsor region, given the high volume of traffic that crossed there on a daily basis. According to the Assistant Commissioner for the “O” Division of the RCMP (which covered southern Ontario): “It would be completely impossible to establish any system of rigid checking of traffic across the Border in either direction without completely tying up the free movement of people and goods essential to our international commerce and tourist trade.” Since drugs could be so easily concealed on persons and in cars, and their high street value meant that small quantities could be sold at a relatively high profit, it was extremely difficult for officials to detect drugs or deter people from crossing with them. Under “such a situation,” he concluded, smuggling heroin and other substances was “not too difficult.”<sup>33</sup> The high volume of traffic sometimes made it possible for even the high-profile

traffickers to sneak through the enforcement system. For example, known smuggler “Cockeyed Joe” Catalanotti secured temporary visas for his family, and moved them to Windsor, Ontario in order to escape arrest in the US.<sup>34</sup> Though extradition for narcotics crimes did take place, they were challenging because they depended on the neighbouring law enforcement agencies to detect and apprehend the fugitive.<sup>35</sup> In this way, border cities like Detroit and Windsor were desirable locations for heroin importers and distributors—the high volume of traffic at customs checkpoints, and the bureaucratic nature of multiple levels of policing, meant they had the potential to not only evade arrest but also make large profits by tapping into the illegal markets of both countries.

While large-scale importers certainly drew the most attention from law enforcement agencies and the media, their ability to function successfully in the border region was based on the fact that illicit economies were deeply embedded in the cultural landscape of the borderlands. The heroin market that developed in the postwar period relied on a long history of illicit, cross-border industries that shaped the lives of men and women from all socio-economic backgrounds. Members of working class and poor communities in particular often grew up in neighbourhoods where the illicit economy—whether in the form of blind pigs (illegal bars), gambling, drug use, or prostitution—had a visible presence in their lives on a daily basis. The visibility of vice economies in the region had its roots in the decades of the 1920s when cross-border liquor smuggling proved tremendously profitable and allowed for the development of wide-spread vice networks.<sup>36</sup> Illicit economies continued to grow in the postwar period with the expanding visibility of vice economies on city streets. Former users often described Detroit as a city where neighbourhoods operated on a ‘wide open’ basis, and where drugs were easily bought and sold. For example, one recovered addict explained that it was easy for him to turn to the illicit economy due to both the few choices available to him, and the ease with which he could

integrate into the illicit community. He explained that the “environment” that he grew up in during the 1950s, and “the people that I was closely associated with at that time and most of my life had been directly or indirectly involved in narcotics. And our neighbours, and our neighbourhoods, almost in every other block there was some form of dope house.”<sup>37</sup> The former user’s recollection highlights the visibility of illicit economies on city streets, and degree to which they were integrated into the broader social and economic environment within specific neighbourhoods.

Southern Ontario cities similarly developed intricate vice networks, due in part to their close proximity to burgeoning illegal markets in the United States. In the postwar period, Windsor and Toronto operated on a ‘wide open’ basis, with industries like gambling, bootlegging, and prostitution taking place openly on city streets. As one 1950 exposé of the vice industry in Windsor explained, “Many brothels and blind pigs were running wide open” in the cities of Windsor, Toronto, and Detroit. “In back-room sin-bins, sandwiched between factories and tumble-down shop,” the article explained, “wide open bootlegging or the favours of a prostitute can be enjoyed—at a price.”<sup>38</sup> Significantly, the author also travelled to Detroit and Toronto in order to document the level of vice activities that took place in the region, and the ease with which an outsider to purchase illegal goods and services. The author found that it was simply a matter of asking a few questions, and one was soon directed to brothels, blind pigs, and gambling dens in each city.<sup>39</sup> These illegal economies in the Southern Ontario region further relied on an interconnected network of illicit business, with convenient store owners, cab drivers, and bar owners facilitating the contact between brothel owners, bars, and American tourists.<sup>40</sup> Consequently vice networks were visible to both participants and outsiders alike, with residents regularly complaining about the long line-ups outside brothels, and the noise coming from loudspeakers inside illegal gambling halls in downtown neighbourhoods.<sup>41</sup> Illicit drug networks

were linked to these broader vice economies, as traffickers and peddlers travelled between the cities of Toronto, Windsor and Detroit in order to buy and sell their illegal commodities. Just as other vice economies operated openly on city streets within the region, using communities were becoming increasingly visible to non-using residents, particularly in large Ontario cities like Toronto.<sup>42</sup>

The drug markets that operated across American and Canadian cities were about more than simply the flow of goods—the users and sellers that transported the commodity between cities were central to the development of cross-border drug networks. Users met in a variety of places, including on the streets and in bars, jazz clubs, and house parties. In Windsor in particular, officials became extremely weary of Americans crossing into their city to pursue illicit leisure activities. Bars and clubs with jazz and big bands regularly came to the attention of police and Liquor License Board of Ontario officials for inappropriate behaviour, including drug use and prostitution. They were particularly concerned that Americans were patronizing Windsor establishments for the purposes of vice activities, facilitated by American-style jazz bands.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, according to a speech given by Corporal Kelly La Brash of the Toronto RCMP, the use of heroin and marijuana was increasing among “jazz groups, beatniks, and musicians” in both Toronto and smaller communities that bordered the United States. He explained that cities within close proximity to the US were drawing users across, since apparently the heroin in Ontario was much stronger than that sold in the US. “We have [Americans] coming over here for stronger kicks,” he lamented.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, a woman interviewed by the 1955 US Senate Committee on Narcotics, explained that she crossed into Windsor from Detroit in order to buy heroin. She recalled bringing heroin back across the border in her pocket, and that the heroin in Windsor was stronger than what she usually bought in Detroit.<sup>45</sup> Just as the formal economy drew tourists, shoppers, and commuters across the border, the search for illegal goods and illicit

entertainment likewise drew men and women into borderland cities.

Canadian and American users were united beyond socio-economic similarities and their geographical proximity; they also participated in similar urban subcultures that provided men and women with alternative forms of leisure and labour. Though the desire to obtain and/or sell heroin was a central impetus behind the flow of users and sellers, the interconnected nature of drug networks went beyond the attainment of a specific product. It also became symbolic of postwar modes of conspicuous consumption, which emphasized, as historian Lori Rotskoff put it, the use of “commodified substances to achieve an ever-elusive sense of immediate gratification.”<sup>46</sup> Carstairs and Abigail Leigh Bowers have provided crucial insight into the connections between using heroin and these larger consumption practices in the postwar years. Arguing that illicit consumption enabled a subcultural community of users to develop, their studies provide important insight into the ways in which heroin users were integrated into larger social forces in the postwar period.<sup>47</sup> An attention to the consumption culture in the Detroit-Windsor borderland further illuminates the role that mobility played in this process, and the similar connections that enabled Americans and Canadians alike to participate in using communities across multiple geographical locations. Members of heroin subcultures in various Great Lakes cities regularly came into contact with one another through their efforts to attain drugs, and the shared characteristics of using communities across the Great Lakes region meant that users were able to navigate between communities in each city with relative ease.

The postwar glorification of leisure, travel, and consumption were embraced to a degree within the drug market, as users moved according to the availability of drugs, and commodities flowed through established cross-border drug networks. As the head of the South-western Ontario division of the RCMP explained: “We have got a floating population. If there is a panic, let us say, in Hamilton [Ontario]—and by “panic” I mean in short supply—we will have them up

from Hamilton, until the supply eases there. There have been times in the past where there has been a panic here, and they headed to Hamilton or Windsor, or wherever they can get it.”<sup>48</sup> One *Star* article explained that the number of known “addicts” in Windsor was actually quite small, but the population frequently increased due to the number of users who travelled through Windsor in search of heroin. As the article explained, “this figure is a minimum one, as the addict population here is much higher from time to time as addicts from across the country travel through Windsor.”<sup>49</sup> Similarly, drug users interviewed by the 1955 US Senate Committee on Illegal Drug Use indicated that they travelled to various cities in the Great Lakes region in search of drugs, including Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland, Windsor, and Toronto.<sup>50</sup> The search for illegal commodity goods brought users together for similar purposes, and facilitated the development of a market that reached beyond both individual cities and the national border.

The fact that drug users tended to be concentrated in particular neighbourhoods meant these spaces often elicited a degree of intrigue and excitement from those outside of the city looking to have a good time. A young woman from small-town Ontario recounted that when she first used heroin at sixteen, she “thought it was wonderful.” She testified before the 1955 Senate Committee On Narcotic Drugs in Canada that she often went to the nearest urban centre, Toronto, to play “hookey.” She recalled that there was only one place to go when skipping school, “and that is to the worst part of the city. There you run into people. I was *fascinated* by them.”<sup>51</sup> Detroit similarly drew suburbanites into the city for excitement. For example, Betty, on her sixteenth birthday, decided to go downtown to celebrate. She “went to a beer garden in the north-west section of the city, and, while there, her curiosity got the best of her and started her first shot of narcotics.” She particularly enjoyed the experience because she found “it helped her listen to the band, sort of give a boost to the music.”<sup>52</sup> The fact that drugs circulated in large numbers in particular neighbourhoods, and among an identifiable groups of people, helped to

bolster its appeal for some, particularly young, people living outside of the communities. Whether to drink, dance, listen to music, or take drugs, people from suburban and smaller cities were drawn to urban centres in search of fun and adventure, enjoying a combination of licit and illicit leisure pursuits in exciting and alluring downtown neighbourhoods.

Though introduced to heroin in many different environments and circumstances, one common thread that united men's and women's decision to try heroin was the desire to attain a heightened state of physical pleasure. One former heroin user recounted that he had heard that heroin use brought intense physical pleasure, matched only by sex. When asked to describe the feeling he had when he used, he recalled: "Well, it's very difficult to describe, even the way I felt. Some people have said it's the way to...one of the great sexual experiences one might have. It's been also compared to a man having a climax with a female possibly at the same moment. It's one of those highly sensual types of feelings, but it's a fleeting type of thing."<sup>53</sup> Similarly, at a conference on addiction held in Toronto, one researcher noted that heroin users regularly described the feeling they got from heroin as an "orgiastic climax."<sup>54</sup> This language suggests that using heroin represented one of the ultimate forms of physical pleasure, one matched only by sexual gratification. This pleasure, though, was also ephemeral, encouraging users to continue to purchase heroin in search of this highly sensual experience. Another former heroin user explained that he began using heroin as an alternative to drinking and marijuana. When asked why preferred heroin over sobriety, he said he did not mind sobriety, but "...if I could feel better, I'd rather feel better."<sup>55</sup> Peggy, a former user, similarly recalled that she wanted to try heroin because she would watch people use, and "they would make such a fuss about the obvious enjoyment they were getting out of it..."<sup>56</sup>

The desire for physical pleasure was linked to a desire to fit into 'hip' community of people, reflecting the notion that one could attain community belonging through their

consumption practices. One former addict, in his interview before the Michigan Legislative Committee, recalled that he started using due to both “curiosity” and “bad company.” As he recalled, “It became a fad....Most of the young people started using it after so many top bands and stuff like that, they found out they were using it and, after one main star got arrested for it, it more or less became a fad from then on with the younger generation.”<sup>57</sup> In 1953, Mayor Albert E. Cobo commissioned a study of drug addicts in the city of Detroit, which further noted the relationship between the emerging youth culture within the urban centre of Detroit, and its link to changing cultural values and attitudes among young men and women in the 1950s. The committee found much evidence of a distinct culture among drug users, one dominated by particular social codes that deviated from the mainstream. The committee found that drug use often began at a young age, with urban youth demonstrating an “exaggerated amount of thrill-seeking recklessness and ‘try-anything’ attitude[s].” In these cases, an individual “wishes to gain and to maintain full acceptance and full participation in whatever ‘fun’ the group may adopt.” Further, it argued, “drug use may actually provide a path to prowess and distinction for the user among his fellows, since it shows daring.” Once they chose this path, “the addicted person tends to become more or less part of a definite sub-culture, with most activity drug-motivated and dominated by the drug using group. It uses slang and expressions and other words with meaning understood only by those who are part of the sub-culture.”

Significantly the report concluded that drug use enabled marginalized residents to create an alternative form of consumer culture. Being part the subculture of drug use appeased “the individual’s feelings of lack of status because he has no good job, house, car etc. In groups made up of individuals that feel deprived...drugs circulate and are a form of social activity, carried on mainly together.” The report further explained that, “since the war the earning ability, while not large, of even those often considered least employable has put drug purchases within the reach of

many group-members.”<sup>58</sup> The notion that postwar prosperity enabled a distinct using culture was echoed by the Canadian Department of National Health and Welfare in 1950, which claimed that “addiction increased during [that year], partly due to the availability of substantial quantities of heroin which have been smuggled into the country, and partly due to the generally high level of prosperity and consequently increased earning power of addicts and potential addicts.”<sup>59</sup> Contemporary reports highlight the fact that urban drug users in the postwar period consisted of a particular subculture, one whose members did not conform to traditional social mores and modes of consumption privileged in the postwar period. Yet their very participation in this illicit subculture was based on the pleasure of consumption, and their ability to consume heroin functioned as a form of sociability among users, one that provided marginal city residents with alternative definitions of community and belonging.

Many users were introduced to drugs through their connection to the jazz scene of the 1940s and 1950s, and musicians and fans alike travelled between cities in order to see shows, mingle with musicians, and obtain drugs. For example, jazz clubs and bars on the Canadian side of the border often attracted American musicians over to play gigs, and several musicians came to the attention of the RCMP and local police when they engaged in drug use on the Canadian side of the border.<sup>60</sup> Interviews with former musicians similarly indicate that their desire to fit in the jazz scene that developed across North American cities often enticed them to use drugs like marijuana and heroin. Ted Stewart, a musician and former heroin addict recalled that in 1955 he “was introduced to marijuana by a friend of mine. Both he and I were musicians. He offered me a marijuana cigarette...I didn’t want to show I was the least bit square, because at the time I wanted to be hip, we used to call it then. I smoked marijuana and I got high off it, and to be truthful about it, I enjoyed the feeling at the time.”<sup>61</sup> He further recalled that he “played tenor saxophone, and most of my professional playing was right after I got out of the army. This was a

reason also for me to be drawn more to narcotics, because all of the people I admired were musicians like Charlie Parker and Miles Davis, and they used narcotics. I thought it would improve my playing, but it never did.”<sup>62</sup>

Similarly, Rodger Moyer was fifteen years old when, in the late 1940s, he left Detroit with his band and headed to New York City. There he met members of another band from Detroit, and they introduced him to heroin: “We were all in a room together, and they asked me if I wanted to get high. Rather than say no, for fear of being ostracised, or being looked upon as a square, I said yes. And that’s when I took my first shot of heroin...I was just wanting to belong to a certain group of people, to my peer group.”<sup>63</sup> Moyer explained that he continued heroin when he returned to Detroit because, unlike alcohol and marijuana, it allowed him to perform as a musician. He further explained, “I functioned for a while as a musician, and I did a lot of travelling around the country. And for a while I was making a pretty decent buck. But then all good things come to an end. Big bands went out. Jazz became sort of out of fashion. And by this time, I was deeply into the drug subculture.”<sup>64</sup>

As Steward and Moyer's narratives suggest, the initial search for pleasure and the sense of community experienced by some users was often short-lived and the internal hierarchies within using communities were often exacerbated by the fact that, once hooked, many users found it difficult to maintain a steady income or earn enough to keep up their habits. Eric Schneider argues that users who began using in North American cities in the 1940s were often “neighbourhood ‘cool cats’—hustlers, gamblers, and pimps who made their living on the street.” These figures conveyed the message that heroin was hip, and that its users were an elite distinguished from the ordinary working people of the neighbourhood. The earlier generation of heroin users who began in the 1940s was perceived as respectable; they never passed out in the streets, and they never leave home without being presentable. This was contrasted with users

who started in the 1960s, who were perceived as stereotypical street ‘junkies,’ and who quickly became addicted to shooting heroin.<sup>65</sup>

A former heroin user’s account similarly demonstrates a differentiation between the type of heroin a person consumed, and their status within the region’s using community during the 1950s and 1960s. He explained that, “a person shooting drugs seems to be less conscious about his personal appearance or his self-respect than a person who is snorting. A person who is snorting will try to maintain himself as he was before he became an addict...He will try to continue his social ties. Whereas a person with a shooting habit will sever all his ties, all social ties primarily, and would not be conscientious about his dress or his personal appearance or personal hygiene. They just don’t seem to care any more, the majority of them...” As a result, he found that “the people who are involved indirectly or directly with drugs sort of look down on a person who shoots. Whereas a person who snorts is...higher on the hierarchy.”<sup>66</sup> The former user’s recollections demonstrate that the drug subculture consisted of hierarchies and distinctions, which to some extent reflect both internal class divisions and changing cultural definitions of acceptable use. The way one dressed, and their connections to others within the community, were often shaped by the type of heroin used, and in turn also determined their position within the street culture.

Many users often began selling drugs in an attempt to make a living, but hierarchies within the heroin market made this a difficult undertaking for sellers who operated on a small scale. In contrast to members of organized syndicates, few local peddlers became wealthy through the illegal drug market. For example, in 1951 the Michigan Legislative Committee interviewed “Larry,” a man serving two to fifteen years in a Michigan penal institution for crimes committed in order to obtain drugs, about how to create laws to stop the narcotics traffic. Larry’s answer revealed the fact that he perceived a clear divide between traffickers at the top and local

sellers trying to make ends meet: “All I know is that it is a vicious racket, a million dollar racket for whoever is behind it.” When the interviewer used the terms ‘trafficker’ and ‘peddler’ interchangeably, Larry responded: “I am not quite clear on what do you mean by the peddlers...because a lot of the peddlers that I know—what I call a peddler—is little men who have nothing and they’re just pushing the stuff to keep up their own habits, more or less.”<sup>67</sup> Similarly, Rodger Moyer, who sold drugs in Detroit during the early 1960s, noted that in his experience, few local-level sellers made large profits off selling drugs: “I believe it’s only a very small percentage who make a big profit off narcotics. The ones who make a great profit don’t use and the ones who do use don’t make too big of a profit. They might maintain a home or maybe keep a small family, even buy a car now and then, but I think most of them sell it for their own convenience.”<sup>68</sup> In Moyer’s experience, while selling drugs could bring some profit for local sellers, they by no means became wealthy through the drug trade, and often faced the added problems of addiction and imprisonment.

Towards this end, a pattern emerges when one compares the studies of ‘addiction’ (i.e. street users and peddlers) with contemporary studies of ‘organized crime’ (i.e. large-scale traffickers): the race and class disparities between these two groups reflect an internal logic of inequality animating the illicit economy. The local dealers in Detroit, the ones least likely to make large profits off the drug trade, were predominately African American. According to Russell McCarthy, Inspector of the Narcotic Bureau for the Detroit Police Department, the majority of illegal drug trafficking (almost seventy percent) was located in the area of the city bordered by Woodward Avenue to the west, Lafayette Street to the south and East Grand Boulevard to the north. McCarthy described this area as “a lower-class section of the city” where “the housing conditions are not as they are in other sections of the city.” He further estimated that seventy percent of narcotics took place in these neighbourhoods, and that eighty-nine percent of

those arrested were African American.<sup>69</sup> Again, lower-level drug sellers became linked with particular low-income neighbourhoods, ones dominated by working-class, African American residents. As a result, the sellers that had the least to gain financially were also the most at risk by uneven and racialized enforcement policies.

In contrast to the drug economy that emerged in American cities, heroin use in Ontario tended to be concentrated in white communities, reflecting in part the different racial make-up of the province.<sup>70</sup> However, like their American neighbours, users in Ontario cities were similarly from poor or working-class backgrounds. Clayton Mosher's study of drug arrests in Toronto, Windsor, Hamilton, London, and Ottawa found that about sixty-six percent of users and seller were from "working" class backgrounds, with roughly an additional fifteen percent listed as "unemployed."<sup>71</sup> Carstairs's study of drug users across English Canada reveals a similar national pattern where users and sellers were overwhelmingly from "economically disadvantaged backgrounds."<sup>72</sup> Across Michigan and Ontario cities, then, the men and women who worked as local peddlers, often the people who made the least amount of money in the drug trade, tended to be members of marginal communities in the city. Just as the formal capitalist economy was stratified by race and class, African American and working class Canadians at the bottom of the drug market hierarchy tended to make little monetarily, and be regularly subject to intense policing practices.<sup>73</sup>

In this way, the mobility afforded by the illicit economy, and one's ability to successfully integrate into a community of users, was shaped by both internal and external hierarchies. While the illicit market enabled marginal members of urban communities to participate in a consumption-based culture, and to engage with a close community of users that spanned metropolitan and national lines, it did so in uneven ways. The pleasure one experienced through their use of heroin was often tempered by long-term addiction. Likewise, race and class divisions

within the heroin economy itself often meant that the poorest members of using communities seldom had the ability to climb the economic ladder in the illicit market. African American and working-class men and women, particularly those who became addicted to heroin, continued to work at the bottom of the social hierarchy. In this way, the commodity-driven market came to reinforce many of the social divides that developed in the Detroit-Windsor region during the postwar period. Segregation, economic stratification, and class lines similarly emerged in illicit communities, suggesting illicit communities were much more integrated into the postwar cultural and economic environment that many contemporaries wanted to admit.

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Following World War II, vibrant heroin subcultures emerged in the US and Canada, and had a direct impact on cities within close proximity to the national border. In the Great Lakes region, heroin use became concentrated in particular neighbourhoods across urban centres, facilitating the development of identifiable communities of users. These men and women tended to be from economically and socially marginal backgrounds, and used the illicit economy as a way to supplement the increasingly volatile labour market of the postwar period. This subculture, though providing alternative modes of both leisure and income, often reinforced race and class divides within the region, where poor, working class, and African American users and sellers were the most likely to become addicted to the substance, and make the least money off of the illicit trade. In this way, the risky business of drug buying and selling was performed by those most vulnerable in the region, who were increasingly at risk of arrest, incarceration, and addiction.

Yet people who began using heroin in the 1940s and 1950s did so for a number of overlapping reasons, not simply as a response to the social pressures shaping postwar urban

centres. Using provided men and women with an intense form of physical pleasure and a culture of consumption that modified normative North American values. Americans and Canadians began using out of a desire to fit into what they perceived as a 'hip' group of people, who fashioned their own style, language, music, and interpersonal relationships. Consumption and mobility were key facets within this subculture—the image of the wealthy hustler, the 'hipster,' and the 'cool' and talented musician were tropes that permeated this community. Though most often located within urban centres, the drug culture was fluid and relied on the movement of people across various geographical spaces. In this way, it helped to bring Canadian and American users together within particular city spaces, and along the national border, in order to participate in illicit and illegal forms of consumption and leisure. Canadians and Americans travelled to obtain drugs, socialize, and mingle in cities on both sides of the border, much to the chagrin of law enforcement officials, government agents, and customs officials. In this way, the postwar heroin market was simultaneously transnational and shaped by the local urban neighbourhoods in which it emerged.

Focusing on the pleasurable and consumerist qualities of the heroin subculture is not to deny the very real problems for users who became addicted. As Musto, Courtwright, Cartsaers, and Schneider have shown, heroin had very damaging effects on urban communities and individuals in the postwar period, who became physically sick and were often incarcerated for large portions of their life.<sup>74</sup> Yet tracing the links between heroin, consumption, and pleasure helps us to more fully understand a key reason why users began in the first place. Though many contemporary social reformers and law enforcement officials may have perceived this subculture as a deviant group of individuals, these should not be simply dismissed as 'delinquent' communities; rather, they played an important economic and social role in Canadian and American cities in the postwar period. In order to understand how and why heroin use developed

in large numbers during this period, then, it is important to listen to the voices and stories of those who were actual members of using communities.

This paper also demonstrates that this was not simply a national issue or phenomenon. The striking similarities between the Canadian and American experience with drug use in this period suggests that we can learn something by placing them within the same framework. Americans and Canadians crossed the border for drugs, bought drugs imported from the neighbouring nation, and travelled from city to city within broad circles of interconnected individuals in the Great Lakes region. In this way, drug subcultures were portable and shaped by the interactions of individuals who moved across a wide variety of spaces—including the national line. Though the story of illegal drugs is necessarily about regulation at the national borders, a topic that is beyond the scope of this paper, it is also about how communities were connected *across* these borders. Drugs did not stop at the border, nor did users themselves (unless, like De Bozy and his girlfriend, they were unlucky enough to be pulled over by customs agents or law enforcement officials). Thus, an attention to the flows of people and illegal commodities can help us more fully understand the regional connections between Americans and Canadians during a period when the nations were becoming increasingly socially, economically, and politically intertwined.

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- <sup>2</sup> For studies on drug use as transnational commodities, see: Paul Gootenberg, ed., *Cocaine: Global Histories* (London: Routledge, 1995); Kjetil Bruun, Lynn Pan, and Ingemar Rexed, *The Gentleman's Club: International Control of Drugs and Alcohol* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975); Rudi Matthee, "Exotic Substances: The Introduction and Global Spread of Tobacco, Coffee, Cocoa, Tea, and Distilled Liquor, Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries." In Roy Porter and Mikulas Teich, eds. *Drugs and Narcotics in History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 24-51.
- <sup>3</sup> Julian Minghi, "From Conflict to Harmony in Border Landscapes," in Dennis Rumley and Julian V. Minghi, eds., *The Geography of Border Landscapes* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 17. For studies on drug trafficking across the US-Mexico border, see, for example: Victor J. Hinojosa, *Domestic Politics and International Narcotics Control: US Relations with Mexico and Columbia, 1989-2000* (New York: Routledge, 1989); Howard Campbell, *Drug War Zones: Frontline Dispatches from the streets of El Paso and Juarez* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009); Tom Barry, Harry Browne, and Beth Sims, *Crossing the Line: Immigrants, Economic Integration, and Drug Enforcement on the US-Mexico Border* (Albuquerque: Resource Center Press, 1994).
- <sup>4</sup> Eric Schneider, *Smack: Heroin and the Postwar City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Catherine Carstairs, *Jailed for Possession: Illegal Drug Use, Regulation, and Power in Canada 1920-1961* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).
- <sup>5</sup> This article is influenced by Schneider's analysis of New York City during the postwar period. In his nuanced analysis the author demonstrates the interconnections between the transnational market that brought the commodity to the city, and the way that local developments within the city itself shaped the local and national market. This article pushed us to consider this connection along the Canada-US border, which was further complicated by the national line that connected the two countries. Here local and transnational came together in interesting ways in borderlands spaces, and this article will trace the meaning of the complex meaning of these overlapping spatial geographies. Schneider, *Smack*.
- <sup>6</sup> David Courtwright, "Mr. ATOD's Wild Ride: What Do Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drugs Have in Common?," *The Social History of Alcohol and Drugs* 20 (2005), p. 121.
- <sup>7</sup> Elaine Tyler May, "The Commodity Gap: Consumerism and the Modern Home," in Lawrence B. Glickman, ed., *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 313; Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: the Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003); Karen Dubinsky, *The Second Greatest Disappointment: Honeymooning and Tourism in Niagara Falls* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1999), p. 13; Joy Par, *Domestic Goods: The Material, the Moral and the Economic* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).
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- <sup>17</sup> Robert A. Heuton, "Urban Sprawl: A Comparative Study of the Detroit-Windsor Region" (PhD dissertation,

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- <sup>18</sup> The *Detroit Area Study*, conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan in 1956, noted that though the average and median income of families in Detroit and its surrounding suburbs were rising, there remained a significant gap between black and white families. In 1951, the differential between the white and black median family income was \$1300. In 1955, the difference had increased to \$2000. Social Services, *Detroit Area Study*, p. 4.
- <sup>19</sup> Sidney Fine, *Violence in the Model City: The Cavanaugh Administration, Race Relations, and the Detroit Riot of 1967* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), p. 39.
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- <sup>28</sup> "Behind Drug Ring," *Saskatoon Star* (April 11, 1946), p. 7. For a sample of additional news reports on cross-border smuggling along the Ontario border, see: "3 Extradited on Charges of Smuggling," *The Calgary Herald* (June 10, 1961), p. 53; "Narcotics Agents Seize 16 in Buffalo Smuggling Setup," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (February 11, 1960), p. 14; "Canadians Said Part Drug Ring," *Saskatoon Star* (August 12, 1963), p. 18; Carey Wilber, "Reveal Crystal Beach Teen-Age Dope Plot," *Globe and Mail*, 27 June 1951, 1.
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- <sup>36</sup> For a first-hand account of the visibility of vice economies in the 1920s, see: Coleman Young, *Hard Stuff: The Autobiography of Coleman Young* (New York: Viking, 1994).
- <sup>37</sup> Anonymous, Interview with Gwen Hall, (June 6, 1970) Methadone Treatment for Heroin Addiction Collection, Box 70-U, Folder: Oral History Partial Transcript #1, Bentley Historical Library, p. 3. Where applicable, all names from these files have been changed to keep the anonymity of the interviewees.
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- 65 Schneider, *Smack*, p. 43.
- 66 Hall, Gwen. Interview at Lafayette Clinic with Anonymous Patient, Detroit, MI (June 6, 1970), p. 6. Methadone Treatment for Heroin Addiction Collection, Box 70-U, Folder: Oral History Partial Transcript #1, Bentley Historical Library.
- 67 *Legislative Committee to Study the Narcotic Problem in Michigan*, p. 30. “Larry” is a pseudonym the committee gave the interviewee.
- 68 Rodger Moyer, Interview with Gwen Hall, (May 28, 1970) Methadone Treatment for Heroin Addiction Collection, Box 70-U, Folder: Oral History Partial Transcript #1, Bentley Historical Library, p. 1.
- 69 US, *Illicit Narcotics Traffic*, p. 4489.
- 70 Despite the large African American population in Detroit, just across the border the African Canadian population made up less than 1% of the Windsor’s population in the 1950s. Peggy Bristow, “A Duty to the Past, a Promise to the Future: Black Organizing in Windsor—the Depression, World War II, and the Post-War Years,” *New Dawn: The Journal of Black Canadian Studies* vol. 2, no. 1 (2007), p. 20.
- 71 Though Windsor had the fourth largest population, it was the third largest percentage of arrests in his study (just under 5%), which Mosher attributed to Windsor’s position as a border city. Mosher, *The Legal Response*, p. 114; p. 123.
- 72 Carstairs, *Jailed for Possession*, p. 71; Schneider, *Smack*, p. 42.
- 73 As The Report of the Mayor’s Committee in Detroit noted, “the low economic status of most persons living in the depressed neighborhoods does not permit much concealment of a drug habit once acquired, and police vigilance in those neighborhoods is high.” See *Report of the Mayor’s Committee*, p. 39.
- 74 Musto, *The American Disease*; Carstairs, *Jailed for Possession*; Schneider, *Smack*; Courtwright, *Dark Paradise*.

