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Peruvian Cocaine: An American Dependence

by Agnes Mary Reband

(English 1102)

*At any given moment, so many things are going on around us. The sun is shining, and the wind is blowing. In the background, you hear the soft strumming of a finger on a guitar, the light tapping of a hand on a drum. A man is singing about his past, present and future.*

**H**ave you ever stopped to think about what shapes us as individuals? What influences and molds us into who we have become? There seem to be three main outside forces that impact us all immensely: people, institutions, and ideas. People, quite possibly, play the most significant role; parents, teachers, peers, role models, and other community members all help us define ourselves everyday throughout this life-long journey. Institutions like government, schools, media, and churches are all outside forces that impact us, but we never stop to think about how much they govern not only what we do, but also who we are. Ideas also play a very big part; morals, values, the arts, or even Darwinism can simply change our lifestyles or even our entire focus on life. These three systems are subtle and ever present, and we are conditioned by their ability to evoke responses from us.

According to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, music has been a “universal language” throughout time. This “language” has proved to be the perfect outlet for expressing oneself and one’s feelings, sometimes about life in general, or about a specific topic (i.e. peace or love) or event. Many artists have written songs with lyrics that make statements or actually tell stories of struggle and/or suffering of their families, their people, or society as a whole. They usually tend to comment on the “bigger picture” issues like racism, sexism, religion, politics, poverty, and war. Sometimes they even “protest” an issue and express dislike in hopes of pushing for reform.

More recently, artists have been writing about the environment, human rights and war. Many songs have been written to protest a general dislike of our current government and their decisions and actions. Of these songs is a lesser-known song called “Peruvian Cocaine” written by an artist known by the stage name Immortal Technique. Born Felipe Coronel in Peru in 1978, Immortal Technique grew up on the streets of New York. He hasn’t always been a social activist and a revolutionary; he was once a confused youth, and had been incarcerated on many occasions for assault and other similar charges. When he refused to give the states evidence before and during his in-depth study about Revolutionary ideas floating around in his native land of South America, he was sentenced to 1-2 years, but was granted parole in 1999. While in prison for these charges, he studied, worked out, and began establishing his attitudes and beliefs as well as writing some of his songs (“Biography”).

Let’s get this straight: This paper is not about cocaine. It is about power. Every character introduced in the song as well as every other character who takes part in the production, sale, distribution and use of cocaine is somehow related to this concept of power, from the prison inmate who has absolutely no control over his life to the American drug distributor, who has more power than he knows what to do with. Remarkably, some people will go to great lengths to acquire any amount of power; we have seen this throughout history, particularly in those who acquired power and had reputations to defend in order to protect it.

Musician, revolutionary and activist Immortal Technique is of Afro-Peruvian descent, and constantly tells stories of the struggle of his people. One of his songs in particular, “Peruvian Cocaine,” tells the story of “the path drugs take on their way to every neighborhood, in every state of

this [U.S.] country...” (Typed by VeinzFAQ@yahoo.com). His lyrics allow the listener to “put themselves in someone else’s shoes” to fully understand what has been happening to his people in South America and the many injustices they face at the hands of our own government. He uses other artists with views parallel to his own to tell his story. They each assume the roles of “a few other characters involved in this tragic comedy...” (Typed by VeinzFAQ@yahoo.com).

The South American country of Peru plays a very significant role in the story. According to one source, “In general, the majority of Peruvians have a very low standard of living” (“Peru” 609). Much of Peru’s rural areas lack electricity, clean drinking water, and healthcare. It is a country with a divided society, with seemingly two polar extremes: the wealthy European elitists, who descended from the Spanish Conquistadors, and the *mestizos*, who descended from the Incas, who once dominated much of South America before the Spaniards arrived in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. These Spaniards were attracted to South America mainly for the gold and silver mines of the Andes. They used the land (Peru in particular) not only for wealth but also for power in South America (“Peru”).

Some of the earliest accounts of coca date all the way back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century during the time of these Spanish conquests. These accounts were made by Spanish historians, in particular, Cieza de Leon, who once said that the use of the drug by the natives was an “ill habit.” He also said that it has an extremely high economic value and that many Spaniards became rich through its production, sale, and distribution (Inciardi).

One of the main topics discussed in the song is Peru’s agriculture. The coca leaf, the source of cocaine, is a traditional Southern American crop; it is Peru’s “most lucrative cash crop” (“Peru” 607). In 1989, there were an estimated 500,000 acres of land dedicated to growing the coca leaves used to make cocaine, and some 300,000 farmers (40% of Peru’s labor force) were involved in its production. As one resource reports, “an estimated 2/3 of the world’s supply of cocaine originates in Peru, and its sale earns between \$600-800 million annually” (“Peru” 607).

A chapter in the book *The War on Drugs III* reports that “more than 600,000 metric tons of coca leaves are produced annually in Colombia, Bolivia, and Peru” (Inciardi 131). They are sold for \$1-2 for one kilo (which is 2.2 pounds). This is where you begin to understand the injustice that drives *Immortal Technique* on a much more personal level. The poor South American farmers who do all of the manual labor are ironically the ones who earn next to no money but yet have little power. One reason for this may be because they are kept uneducated so as to remain in check... The coca leaves are “pulverized” and soaked in an alcohol/benzol mix, benzol being a petroleum derivative with detergents and insecticides. All is shaken and drained then sulfuric acid is added, shaken, and drained again. Sodium carbonate (baking soda) is added and the mixture is washed with kerosene and chilled. What remains is called coca paste and it has a cocaine concentration of up to 90%, compared to the leaves, which are just 0.5-1% (Inciardi).

“Cutting” cocaine can be done by adding lactose, baking soda, caffeine, powdered laxatives, etc. “Cuts” are expanders for increasing bulk and thus increasing the profit. Cocaine is usually cut to an average of 20-40% purity with a street price of anywhere from \$40-120 per gram. *The War on Drugs III* reports that “in some US cities, cocaine as high as 85% purity is sometimes available, selling for anywhere from \$100-200 per gram” (Inciardi 137).

Cocaine has been referred to as the “Lorelei of orgasmic pleasure;” one snort in each nostril and users are up for twenty minutes. It is described as “an immediate, intensely vivid and sensational experience” (Inciardi 141) and it claims millions of users in the US every year. Users do not suffer hangovers, lung cancer, holes in the arms or loss of cells in the brain. It has been said to be nonaddicting, but many chronic users do “compulsively indulge,” and when they stop, withdrawal symptoms appear, sometimes with severe depression. This strongly motivates users to restore the feelings they felt while on cocaine, and thus the statement “cocaine is nonaddicting” is easily contradicted. The book *The War on Drugs III* argues that “cocaine dependence is very real” (Inciardi 142). The mind has exceptional control over the body, and it has been said that users become

“powerless” over their addictions.

As *The War on Drugs III* emphasizes, “cocaine use in the United States today is considered a major health problem, with between five and ten million users” (Inciardi 130). It was declared illegal in the United States in the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906. Cocaine later came into the mainstream (in the US) during the 60s and 70s. The source also adds “an estimated 375,000 infants are exposed to drugs each year, most have been to cocaine – particularly crack” (Inciardi 158).

Peru’s National Income is not easily determinable because there are many unregulated workers and producers whose income is not reported, and because “official statistics do not reflect profits from international trade in coca leaves and their derivatives” (“Peru” 607). The World Bank, however, estimated Peru’s total output of manufactured goods and services to be about \$21.3 billion (“Peru” 607).

I bet you’re still wondering, “What does this have to do with anything?” Well, if America wants to “eliminate the flow of drugs onto our streets,” than by golly Big Brother America will have to pay (Typed by VeinzFAQ@yahoo.com). They decided that the best way to go about eliminating their cocaine problem had nothing to do with anyone or anything that is happening in their own country; they need to stop it before it even begins in South American countries like Colombia, Bolivia, and Peru. The United States, so far, has contributed \$1.3 billion over the past two years to help and “the final tab for Washington may be a lot bigger than U.S. lawmakers anticipated” (Timmons 60). In the introduction (taken from the film *Scarface*) to “Peruvian Cocaine” one of the two speakers declares: “this money, which is in the *billions*, is coming from your country” (Typed by VeinzFAQ@yahoo.com). This reaffirms the concept that there are no false accusations in this song towards either the US or Peruvian governments.

So where is the American money actually going? Putumayo, Colombia has some 300,000 acres of coca fields, and is home to about 350,000 residents. The U.S. has organized an “anti-drug brigade” to set up blockades throughout these 300,000 acres to reduce supplies like food, oil, and water. This has caused a chain reaction of events: residents of Putumayo had no choice but to leave and cross the border to countries like Ecuador. Ecuador has already received \$2 million from the U.N. to “cope with the Colombian refugees” (Timmons 60). Recently Ecuador’s foreign minister returned to the U.S. to request \$300 million more. When asked about the U.S.’s contributions, a U.N. official said, “...It’s only going to escalate the conflict in Colombia” (Timmons 60).

This briefing on the current state of conflict in Peru and surrounding nations brings us back to our original destination: an analysis of the power circulating all parties involved in the drug trade. In his informative song, Immortal Technique assumes the role of a worker “on the border of Bolivia working for pennies ...treated like a slave, the coca (coca refers to the term ‘coca leaf’ from which processed cocaine is made) fields have to be ready” and describes that they are treated so poorly it is comparable to slavery. He clearly has no power, because if he did, things would be run a little bit differently...

The next character introduced in the song is “Pumpkinhead,” who plays the role of cocaine field boss. He is violent, threatening and intimidating towards the worker: “so to feed your kids, I need these bricks (a brick is a form of cocaine in which it is commonly transported, named appropriately for its shape)...” but still clearly cannot shake his lust for power: “I got the power to shoot a copper, and not get charged...and it would be sad to see your family in front of a firing squad...and don’t worry about them, I paid off the officials” (Typed by VeinzFAQ@yahoo.com).

Fellow musician and friend to Immortal Technique “Diabolic” has actually performed with Immotech on many other occasions, but in this song he plays the Peruvian leader. His character does not know how to lie, and with lyrics like “...I’m the son of some of the foulest...the only one on the ballot...” it is very hard to appreciate him or any of his predecessors. When he says, “born and bred to consult with feds...” we know that he is not lying, but when he says “in a third-world fascist state, lock the nation...with 90% of the wealth in 10% of the population,” your heart can finally fully

understand the injustice fueling these lyrics (Typed by VeinzFAQ@yahoo.com). He will go down in history as someone who took desperate actions to both acquire and maintain power.

“Tonedeff” plays the American drug distributor. In his verse of the song, he is admitting to his wife how all of their financial problems were swept away, but at what cost: “c’mon, our fuckin’ home was built on the foundation of bloody throats...the hungry stolen of they souls, of course this country’s runnin’ coke...” He also blames the problems on another group: “...But the CIA conducts the flow for these young hustlers (drug dealers) who lust for dough (money)” (Typed by VeinzFAQ@yahoo.com).

“Poison Pen” is the ‘street’ drug dealer, a slightly less important character than the drug distributor but still an important one. He talks about how he “don’t work in the hood (ghetto or slums),” which probably isn’t true because most drug dealers deal to people in lower class areas (i.e. the slums) in cities. When he says “give me the YAY YAY like Ice Cube (other rapper), so don’t play with my llello” YAY YAY and llello are both synonyms for cocaine, and also when he says “my street scramblers, chop it and bag it,” ‘chop it and bag it’ is referring to ‘cutting cocaine’ (adding bulk to increase the volume and therefore the price of cocaine) and bagging it for sale (Typed by VeinzFAQ@yahoo.com). Poison Pen’s role is essentially to prove how low and selfish drug dealers can be and also how they, like many of the other characters are, completely driven by this ultimate desire for power.

Next is Loucifer, the undercover police officer. His role is characterized by “taking pictures and tapping phones...on any hustler (drug dealer) stacking dough (usually means ‘making money’) with pumpin crack (crack cocaine) or blow (cocaine – usually refers to the powdered, snort-able form)...and my overtime is where your taxes go.” He seems to pride himself on exploiting others to make more money and is much like the drug dealer in the aspect that they are both extremely selfish and greedy. When he says “get you to hand weight (drugs) to us because we paid up front...on the low with cameras taping ya” he is referring to situations in which police officers pose as potential buyers to bait the dealers, and once the drugs have been purchased, the dealers are arrested. Finally when he says “make the collar and leave with two ki’s (two kilos – one kilo is about 2.2 pounds) out the evidence room” he makes the implication that after the arrest has been made, the police don’t just leave the confiscated drugs in the evidence room (Typed by VeinzFAQ@yahoo.com). His character may be overlooked, but he may be more important because he has a different kind of power, the power of the uniform. He is viewed by the community as a positive asset, and he uses this to the fullest advantage.

Lastly, C-Rayz Walz plays the role of the prison inmate, who essentially talks about how what he did as a drug dealer was nothing compared to men higher up may have done, like the Colombian drug lords. He seems as though he’s talking to current drug users and dealers when he says “so enjoy the rush...soon you’ll be in a cell with me, like Jenny Lopez...” and “the walls got ears, you big mouths probably scared...not prepared to do years like Javier (Francisco Javier Arellano-Felix, a known leader of the Mexican ‘AFO’ drug cartel)” (Typed by VeinzFAQ@yahoo.com).

Just before the end of the song, Immortal Technique says the last few lines. He tells the listeners that “it’s a lot deeper than the niggers on your block...so when they point the finger at you, brother men, this is what you’ve got to tell them...” and then the song cuts to Wesley Snipes saying, “I’m not guilty. YOU’RE the one that’s guilty. The lawmakers, the politicians, the Colombian drug lords...you’re the one who’s guilty...This is big business. This is the American way.” This was a very effective way to end the song: pass the baton. This offers no clear resolution; it simply states the facts. America is in over its head, and we’re the biggest suckers for power in history. We feel that we can fix everyone’s problems, but lately, we’ve been losing that “good Samaritan” approach to personal interest and greed and overall, a lust for power.

After everything I have researched on this subject, I have decided that Immortal Technique

makes no false accusations in this song towards either the US or Peruvian governments in the song, "Peruvian Cocaine." I have not found one ounce of information to doubt that anything he says or declare it untrue.

The power struggle has been, is, and always will be a part of life. Human beings have a weakness for power: it can make millions stand or it can force us all to our knees. The bottom line is, struggles similar to this happen every day, regardless of whether we're aware or don't care or not. We, as a society, are conditioned to be unaware, whereas the truth should be the complete opposite! That is one of the fundamentals of being a good citizen: being conscious of what's happening around you and in the world! If you take anything away with you from this essay I hope you understand that no matter who think you are or where you came from, power is not worth killing or exploiting innocent, hardworking people. We need to learn to be better citizens, more aware of what's going on in our world today, and, instead of conforming to ignorance, be willing to stand against injustices such as actions taken by an illegal multi-billion dollar drug industry and their top sponsor, the United States of America.

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