

Hidden in Plain Sight: Cannabis Cultivation in the Emerald Triangle

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In the checkout line at my local grocery store, a man unloads twelve boxes of turkey oven-roasting bags.

“Looks like you’re gonna have one helluva Thanksgiving!” I joke.

He turns to me, smiles, and leaves the store. It is October and cannabis harvest is in full swing. The clerk looks at me wide-eyed and asks, “You do know what those are really for...don’t you?”

Turkey bags are one of the many subcultural signs that mark the presence of the cannabis industry in Humboldt County, California. Since the 1996 passage of Proposition 215 and the pseudo-legalization of medical cannabis, Humboldt’s leading agricultural product has occupied a legal and cultural gray area. The medical cannabis industry, state and county officials, and law enforcement agencies maintain a fragile peace. Historically, the federal government disrupted this truce when, flexing its authority, it raided local medical cannabis dispensaries (Chapkis 2008) and seized medical cannabis grower records (Mozingo 2013), among other actions. Until California voters first considered legalizing recreational cannabis in 2010, the stigma and legal ambiguity of cannabis prevented fully open conversations and planning between users, growers, public officials, and businesses that participated in and benefited from the industry. In the intervening years leading up to the 2016 passage of Proposition 64, variously positioned players constructed a coded system of signs that now have meaning to even those not directly involved in the industry.

Since the 1970s, work in the cannabis industry gradually replaced the loss of local timber and fishing jobs (Raphael 1985; Anders 1990). Like many communities across the United States struggling with deindustrialization and the outsourcing of blue-collar employment (Reding 2010), my community capitalized on America’s growing appetite for “ganja” and developed an international reputation for quality cannabis.

Using law enforcement seizure quantities as a proxy measure of cannabis production, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2016, 43) reported that most cannabis in the world is produced in North America and Mexico. The majority of global cannabis seizures in 2014 occurred in North America (thirty-seven percent) and South America (twenty-four percent). Moreover, California produced most of the cannabis seized during Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) raids: sixty-two percent of all cannabis seized by DEA agents in 2015 was grown in California (Drug Enforcement Agency 2017). Humboldt County is one of the largest U.S. cannabis-producing areas in the country and a cultural epicenter for the industry (Brady 2013; Corva 2014; Raphael 1985). Humboldt, Mendocino, and Trinity Counties are collectively known as the “Emerald Triangle.”¹

Cannabis cultivation in the Emerald Triangle was first initiated by an exodus of “back-to-the-landers”² fleeing broken promises of late 1960s social movements (Raphael 1985; Anders 1990; Anderson 1990), a migration pattern that somewhat ironically was sparked by U.S. government cannabis interdiction efforts in Mexico and Columbia (Lee 2013).³ However, the scale and density of indoor and outdoor cannabis cultivation in the Emerald Triangle increased substantially following the 1996 passage of the first medicinal cannabis law in the US (Brady 2013). One study estimates that one of every four dollars circulating in Humboldt County is tied to the cannabis industry (Budwig 2011) and the area retail rates for pot are some of the least expensive in the nation. One study found that the further one travels from Humboldt County, the higher the retail price of cannabis (Zook, Graham, and Stephens 2011).⁴

Beginning in 1983, law enforcement raids became more frequent (Corva 2014). A joint alliance of federal and state law enforcement agencies launched heavily armed drug agents from military helicopters onto remote parts of the county. Each year, these paramilitary raids netted increasing quantities of confiscated cannabis. Asset forfeiture and federal drug task-force grants subsidized budgets of local law enforcement agencies (Alexander 2012).

This local “war on drugs” fostered a culture of secrecy and distrust (Brady 2013). In heavy grow areas, neighbors do not ask what one does for a living. During harvest season, school teachers do not question extended student absences. And at the same time, the community has organized to resist attacks on civil liberties from federal and state law enforcement (Lee 2013).

In an era now past, cannabis cultivation was the “green elephant” in the community: Few were willing to debate its presence. In the decades following legalization of medical cannabis in California, Humboldt County

residents, like those in other parts of the Emerald Triangle, developed an ambivalent relationship with the industry. Cannabis became recognized as the economic lifeblood, as well as demonized for its linkages with lawlessness and environmental harm (Hudson-Cossar 2014).

Forest and river ecosystems, still recovering from historic over-logging and -fishing, confront new environmental threats associated with illegal marijuana cultivation in the region. Water diversion, soil erosion, diesel spills, and the excessive use of fertilizers are just some of the byproducts of unregulated cannabis cultivation conspiring to destroy area waterways and vulnerable fish habitats (Bauer et al. 2015). Other environmental dangers include substantial energy use powering industrial-scale indoor cannabis grow operations (Mills 2012), as well as the excessive application of pesticides and herbicides (Gabriel et al. 2015). For example, anticoagulant rodenticides have been widely dispersed around young cannabis plants and observed along miles of irrigation lines following law enforcement raids (Gabriel et al. 2012). The human health and ecosystem impacts from the use of such rodenticides are understudied.

Yet cannabis cash has helped build local environmental organizations. Today these groups are working with land-management agencies to selectively fight “bad growers” (Donahue 2014) who damage rivers and forests with irresponsible cultivation practices. For example, with funding from California Department of Fish and Wildlife, Sanctuary Forest in southern Humboldt developed a technology transfer initiative to purchase and install “over one million gallons of water storage in the Mattole River watershed, resulting in a measurable increase in stream flows within their project area” (Schremmer 2014, 81).

Coded signs of this illicit, not-so-underground economy are woven into everyday life. Whether one is looking at a colorfully decorated local bus or picking up a loaf of bread at the market, images and artifacts remind residents of the Emerald Triangle where they live. The images in this article appeared between 2011 and 2014 in the everyday life of residents in Humboldt County. They are part of my larger research project studying historical shifts in cannabis perceptions, policies, and practices in a heavy cannabis-producing region. Some photos I captured myself while going about my daily routine of walking downtown, shopping for dinner, and picking up light bulbs at the local hardware store. Most were culled from the 2012 to 2014 pages of a Humboldt County newspaper known for publishing cannabis industry advertisements.

In a region well-known for cannabis cultivation, the word “bud” has dual meaning. It references both the well-known national beer as well as the prized flower of the female cannabis plant. In 2011 a billboard appeared along a highway in Humboldt County aligning the cannabis bud with an all-American beer (Figure 1). The tag line “Grab some Buds” in a Hum-



Figure 1. Billboard appearing along major highway in Humboldt County. (personal photograph)

boldt County context linked cannabis consumption with the mainstream pastime of drinking a beer. According to Anheuser-Busch, the original six Clydesdale horses were a 1933 gift from Busch sons to father to celebrate the repeal of Prohibition. The horses, along with the slogan “Great times are Coming,” anticipated a new era of post-prohibition. The following year, Colorado and Washington were the first states to legalize recreational use of cannabis. While some might suggest the dual meaning is coincidence, other, more-explicit advertising suggests the association is intentional and targeted.

The linkage between beer and cannabis advertising was reinforced in a banner displayed in a local bar on April 18, 2013 (Figure 2), two days before “4/20.” The term “4/20” references the date cannabis aficionados celebrate the plant and publicly challenge federal cannabis prohibition. In an annual ritualized act of civil disobedience, they communally “light up” at 4:20 p.m. on the 20th of April (Halnon 2011). The image also depicts hops, the female flowers of the hop plant, which provide flavoring in beer. As with cannabis grown for its use as a drug, male plants are removed to prevent pollination. The advertisement also incorporates a red, yellow, and green border, drawing

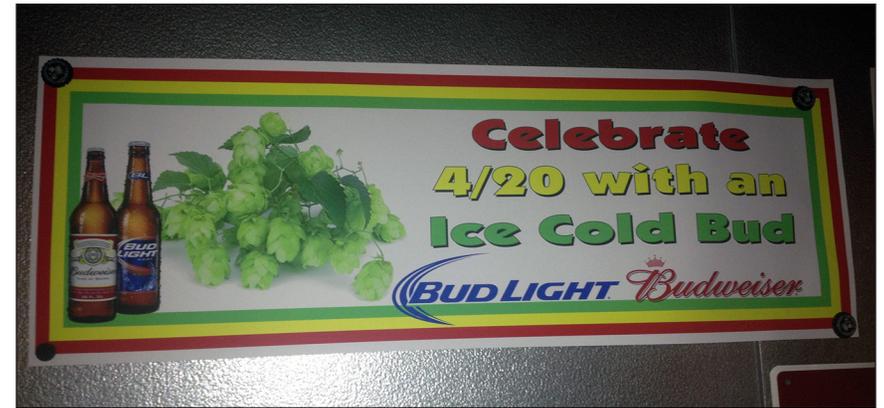


Figure 2. Beer advertisement displayed in Humboldt County bar. (personal photograph)

a symbolic connection to the Rastafari movement and its spiritual use of cannabis. Cultural appropriation of all things “Rasta” is part of the larger, lucrative mass-marketing of the cannabis counterculture.

The proliferation of local horticulture-supply businesses represents another indicator of an illicit cannabis industry. “A Fertile World” is a local horticulture supply shop. In 2014 the shop’s advertisement was featured on a bus operated by the Redwood Transit System (Figures 3 and 4). The regional bus moved that message through the streets and highways of Humboldt County. At first glance, the heavy use of earth tones and symbols, such as the planet Earth and redwood trees that extend the full height of the bus, suggest this is perhaps an ad for a local environmental organization. Yet prominent on the side of the bus is an image roughly resembling a cannabis plant with magnified roots reaching deep into the soil. The ad at once calls the viewer to understand the environmental richness of the area, as well as the strong and deep ties that cannabis has to the region. “Growshops” like Fertile World are highly concentrated in this area and represent the range of businesses that participate in—and prosper from—a cannabis-fueled economy. There are approximately ten times as many grow shops per capita in Humboldt County as there are five hours south, in the San Francisco Bay Area.⁵

The “green rush” of cannabis capitalism, like the other waves of resource extraction that have rolled through this region, has left the community scrambling to reconcile short-term profits with long-term damage to the natural environment and community cohesion. “Strike It Rich” (Figure 5) is an advertisement for another horticultural supply business and was



Figure 3. City bus adorned with advertisement for horticulture supply business. (personal photograph)



Figure 4. Horticulture business advertisement on city bus makes euphemistic reference to “Humboldt County Farming.” (personal photograph)

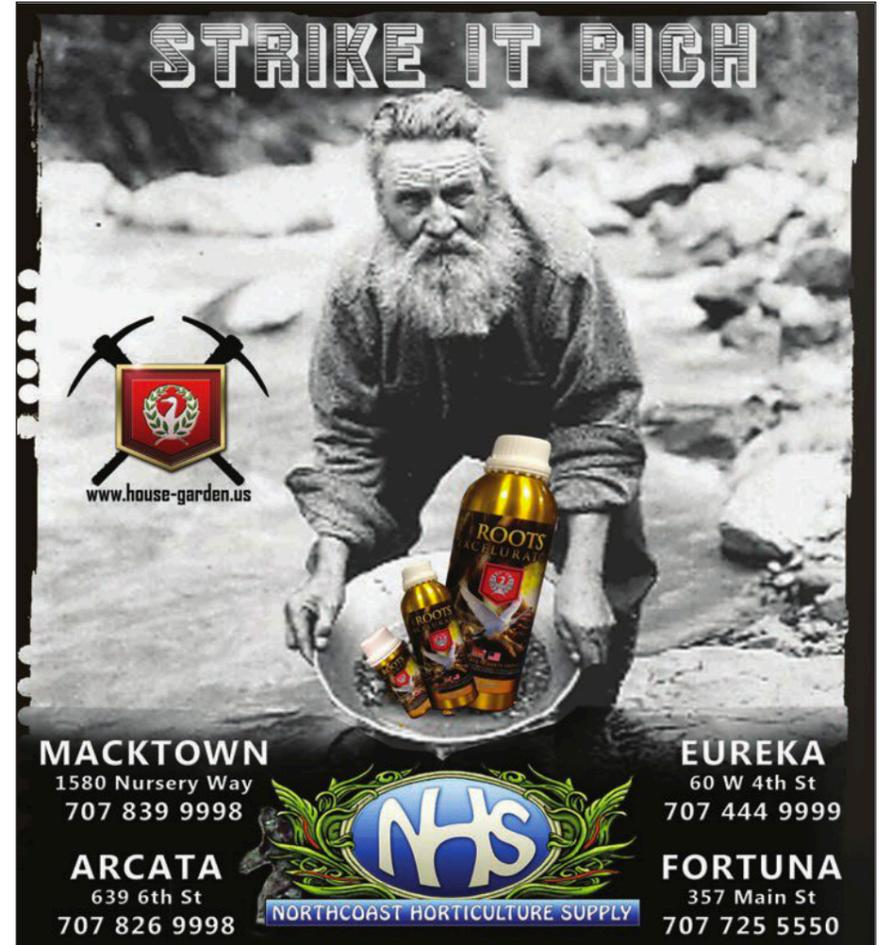


Figure 5. Advertisement for root stimulator sold by local horticulture supply business. (North Coast Journal, March 28, 2013)

featured in a spring 2013 issue of the *North Coast Journal*, a popular Humboldt-based weekly newspaper. The ad draws on an image of the California Gold Rush and the age-old rags-to-riches story. A miner holds a pan filled with bottles of “Roots,” a root stimulator popular among growers. This representation of grower as prospector provides a symbolic link to those who introduced cannabis cultivation to the region in the late 1960s. This first wave of “back-to-the-land” growers are now romanticized for their idealism and strong community ties, while newcomers to the area are viewed with suspicion and contempt. “Green rushers” or “cannabis capitalists” were often represented in the media as having foreign ties, often to Mexican drug cartels (Trujillo 2011). It is

important to note, however, that the influence of Mexican drug cartels in California cannabis cultivation were exaggerated (Kilmer, Caulkins, Bond, and Reuter 2010).

Beyond green rushers drawn to the area by the promise of cannabis profits, the cannabis industry also draws in students attending the local university. This local horticulture shop “Back to School Sale” ad (Figure 6) was featured prominently in a fall 2013 issue of the *North Coast Journal* as students were returning for a new term at the local university. In the advertisement, a student is carrying a backpack past the wall that marks a main university entrance. A closer look at her backpack reveals that it is not loaded with



Figure 6. Advertisement for various horticulture supplies targeting returning college students. (*North Coast Journal*, September 19, 2013)

books and binders; rather, it is overflowing with pruning shears, grow lights, liquid fertilizers, and turkey oven-roasting bags. Like students across the U.S., students at the local university are experiencing greater costs and fewer resources to finance their college education. Students arrive on campus with increased financial needs and encounter a cannabis industry with pervasive mechanisms for recruiting its workforce. One study found that almost one in five local university students surveyed were employed in the cannabis industry (Eschker, Meisel, and Grabinski 2014).

When students return to campus in the fall, a local hardware store features prominent displays (Figures 7 and 8) of some of the necessary supplies needed to build one’s own indoor cannabis grow operation. Displays include grow-light systems and Mylar polyester film, as well as boxes of turkey bags and latex gloves for use during cannabis harvest season. The cannabis industry involves not just those directly involved in the cultivation, processing, and distribution of cannabis; it also includes other peripheral business sectors that have an economic interest in cannabis cultivation. Beyond garden supply shops and hardware stores, these other businesses include builders and suppliers, irrigation system designers and suppliers, Realtors, and security equipment vendors and installers.



Figure 7. Grow light supplies on display at local hardware store. (personal photograph)



Figure 8. Turkey oven roasting bag, latex gloves and contractor bags on display at local hardware store. (personal photograph)

One prominent industry catering to cannabis farmers is the manufacturers of turkey oven roasting bags. In 2010, a “Turkey Oven Bags” billboard (Figure 9) appeared on the main Highway 101 corridor running through Humboldt County. For tourists passing through the region, this billboard must have looked bizarre. For many locals, however, turkey oven-roasting bags are a metaphor for the cannabis economy. Growers package cannabis in these plastic bags because of their durability and odor-blocking properties. As each bag is typically used to transport one pound of processed cannabis, turkey bag sales are a proxy for the scale of the local cannabis industry. When a regional news source reported that “Over 100 Turkey Bags Full of Pot Fail to Make Their Thanksgiving Destination” (Kemp 2012), locals understood both the humor, as well as the lost revenue from the confiscated cannabis. In this bust, the seller most likely lost about \$150,000 in sales.



Figure 9. Billboard advertising turkey oven roasting bags appearing alongside state highway in county. (Kim Sallaway Photography)

Like turkeys raised for Thanksgiving, cannabis grown outdoors is harvested in the fall. “It’s Turkey Season - Again!” (Figure 10) was an advertisement for a garden supply shop that appeared in the *North Coast Journal* at the start of the 2013 cannabis harvest season. A turkey gazes at the threatening scissors in the foreground as a “gardener” sneaks up from behind, ready to



Figure 10. Advertisement for cannabis trimming supplies. (*North Coast Journal*, October 3, 2013)

bag the bird. The symbolic representation of the cannabis harvest as “turkey season” is understood by many locals in the Emerald Triangle. Likewise, the scissors, turkey oven bags, alcohol, and trim bins all displayed in the ad are not intended for processing turkeys. Instead they are used for manicuring the flowering female cannabis plant into an attractive bud for resale.

Some advertisements for turkey bags reflect the race, class, gender, and sexual orientation of those playing in the cannabis industry. “Discount Turkey Bags” (Figure 11) was another ad that appeared in the *North Coast Journal* during cannabis harvest season. The ad features a young white woman in high heels, long stockings, garter belt, and an apron, posing provocatively with



Figure 11. Advertisement for turkey oven-roast bags. (North Coast Journal, October 3, 2013)

her roasted turkey. The kitchen is marked by a restaurant-grade stove, as well as marble and tile surfaces. The image is constructed through a straight male gaze, associating the industry with the good life where both women and wealth are accessible. This particular construction also signals the gender inequality and sexism of licit economies mirrored in the cannabis industry. For example, Craigslist ads recruiting trimmers offered higher pay for “topless” trimmers (August 2012). Female trimmers reported earning about eighty percent of what males earn for the same work (Eschker, Meisel, and Grabinski 2014).

Some advertisements utilize sexually coded language referencing the propagation of female plants from existing plant stock. “Let’s Make Some Babies” was the slogan for two ad campaigns (Figures 12 and 13) launched by two different horticulture supply shops. Both appeared in the *North Coast Journal* and typify the comic use of sex to sell cannabis agriculture products. The first ad features the image of a bull mounting a cow in an open field. The second ad juxtaposes a white hippie complete with long beard and bandana against symbols of middle-class, feminized material comforts: a bubble bath, custom tilework, fresh-cut flowers, and burning candles. The ads target growers preparing to take cuttings and raise clones of female cannabis plants of a desired strain. Growers prefer this method of propagation, as it allows them to both continue producing a desired cannabis strain and prevent fertilization from male plants if they grew directly from seed. Paradoxically, the ad implies sexual reproduction in a process that is anything but sexual, as male plants are removed altogether from cannabis propagation.



Figure 12. Advertisement for cannabis cloning supplies. (North Coast Journal, February 7, 2013)



Figure 13. Advertisement for cannabis cloning supplies. (North Coast Journal)

Other advertisements build upon the desire of growers not just to propagate only female plants, but also to protect their plant stock from disease or infestation. “Clean up those Dirty Girls from Top to Bottom” (Figure 14) was an ad that ran in the *North Coast Journal* during late spring. The ad targeted growers concerned with different types of plant infestations. The photo depicts a crouching, hooded man as the active, almost predatory, agent juxtaposed against the more passive and unaware woman wearing heels and a dress. In the image, the woman is a proxy for the female plant being “fixed” for her dirtiness/infestation. The ad draws on a long history of misogyny targeting women’s bodies and subjecting them to broad and microscopic alterations (Matelski 2017), as well as the social marginalization of women

SALE!
 Atomizers \$219.95
 Sulfur Burners \$85.95
 Battery-Powered Sprayers \$145.95

CLEAN UP THOSE DIRTY GIRLS FROM TOP TO BOTTOM

Prices Valid Through June 1st
 Open Mon-Sat 10am - 6pm
 Sunday 10am - 5pm
 707.826.7435

On Hwy. 101, in the Bracut Industrial Park

BAYSIDE GARDEN SUPPLY
 HYDRO • ORGANICS • SOILS

Figure 14. Advertisement for pest control supplies. (*North Coast Journal*, May 3, 2012)

with sexually transmitted diseases (Nack 2008). The ad reinforces this stigma of female plants infested with spider mites and other pests, by drawing on the broader sexist trope of dirty women in need of fixing.

“Football,” like “girls,” “babies,” and “turkeys,” are featured prominently in the symbolism communicating the local economic cannabis activity. “Keep your footballs fresh until next season!” (Figure 15) was an ad that ran in the *North Coast Journal* during harvest season. The football player on bended knee is carefully sealing footballs using the advertised industrial vacuum sealer. Again, a link is made to a popular American pastime to further solidify the legitimacy of cannabis cultivation in the local community.

Open Mon-Sat 10am-6pm
 Sun 10am-5pm

BAYSIDE GARDEN SUPPLY
 in between Eureka & Arcata
 On HWY 101 in the Bracut Industrial Park

SALE! HYDRO • ORGANICS • SOILS
 707.826.7435

\$459.95 Industrial Vacuum Sealer

\$59.95 15" x 18" 100 pre-cut bags

3 rolls 11" x 18" for \$18.95 ea.

Keep your footballs fresh until next season!

Figure 15. Advertisement for industrial vacuum sealer. (*North Coast Journal*, August 2, 2012)

Cannabis farmers face other threats to their crops. “Greenhouses Keep Piggies and other Critters out of the Garden” was an ad (Figure 16) that ran in the *North Coast Journal* during early summer 2012. Two young pigs gaze innocently at the reader as they stand in a freshly foraged row of young plantings. Greenhouses provide growers greater control over the cultivation process. Growers can moderate temperature, humidity, and even light to manipulate the flowering process. While greenhouses keep animals out of vulnerable gardens, they also conceal cannabis cultivation from potential theft and law enforcement surveillance. In this way, the “piggies” in the ad are also a derogatory reference to police, who pose the omnipresent threat of discovery.

Come by to discuss our many outdoor options

- Greenhouses
- Clear and Black Woven Poly
- Loose Soils
- Irrigation
- Water Storage

GREENHOUSES KEEP PIGGIES AND OTHER CRITTERS OUT OF THE GARDEN

Open Mon-Sat
10am - 6pm
Sunday • 10am - 5pm

707.826.7435

On Hwy. 101, between Eureka and Arcata, in the Bracut Industrial Park

BAYSIDE GARDEN SUPPLY

HYDRO • ORGANICS • SOILS

Figure 16. Advertisement for greenhouse kits. (*North Coast Journal*)

For some in the local community, the cannabis industry represents a public nuisance. A sign stating “Do Not Wash Your Growing Materials Here!! Not Allowed!!” (Figure 17) appeared in the window of a local laundromat. Flowering cannabis contains pungent terpenes. This sign warns growers that they are not allowed to use the laundromat facilities to wash their clothing smelling of cannabis.



Figure 17. Sign posted in window of local laundromat. (personal photograph)

Advertisements also reflect local concerns with the environmental impacts of cannabis farming. “Don’t piss ‘em off. For a better community, get your water storage tanks now” (Figure 18) ran in the *North Coast Journal* in the spring of 2013 and marks a period of mounting news coverage and public discourse about the environmental effects and community impacts of irresponsible cannabis cultivation. The ad features the silhouette of a male figure urinating in a wild river. This series of advertisements reveal an industry well aware of community attitudes and weave that cultural knowledge into the construction of their narrative. Cannabis growers are blamed for diverting too much water from vulnerable fish habitats. Grow shops seize upon this critique to present themselves as playing a mediating role in the community.

Other nuisances targeted by horticulture supply advertisements include the noise and smell emanating from indoor growers. “Love thy neighbor!” ran in the *North Coast Journal* (Figure 19) during this same period of mounting backlash against growers. An angry elderly man shakes his fist at the reader. The ad references increasing community frustration with a proliferation of indoor cannabis growhouses in residential neighborhoods.⁶



Figure 18. Advertisement for water storage tanks. (North Coast Journal, April 11, 2013)

Local news coverage reported the concerns of neighbors with the smell of cannabis and noise from cooling fans. The ad also signals a generational split in which growers are represented as young, in addition to male and straight as depicted in other ads.

The strong smell of flowering cannabis is signaled in “Hide your smell ‘cuz not everyone is a fan” (Figure 20). This advertisement acknowledges community frustrations with residential cannabis production. A man lies on his back, playfully holding a skunk above his head, not bothered by the smell. Imagery is used to represent the skunk-like smell of particularly strong strains of cannabis. Their odor is undesirable for many, and the ad offers solutions. The representation also signals the growing rift between the problems created by the local cannabis industry and the broader community.

In this article, I analyzed common images and artifacts found in a region of the country known for cannabis production. I suggest the symbolic language of the pseudo-legal industry creates insider knowledge and the accompanying humor of sales and marketing efforts. Some of the images appropriate existing artifacts and give them benign new meanings (turkey bags, babies, footballs, and skunks). Others rely on sexist humor in an industry that early research suggests is reproducing gender inequalities found in legal industries in the United States.

Cannabis cultivation, like cannabis use, is experiencing a rapid process of redefinition. While only twelve percent of Americans supported cannabis legalization in 1969, the percentage increased to sixty percent by 2016 (Gal-



Figure 19. Advertisement for noise and smell abatement equipment. (North Coast Journal, February 7, 2013)

lop 2016). Moynihan (1993) called this “defining down” deviance, meaning that as cultural norms and values change, the boundaries of deviance designation change as well. The liberalization of state-level cannabis policies that began in 1996 ushered in a new era of greater openness in public discourse. Within the Emerald Triangle, there are signs that the deviance of cannabis cultivation is being further defined down. While ads for this study included coded systems signaling the hidden industry, many current ads abandon that coding, even while the possibility of a federal crackdown on state-level cannabis legalization remains (Fuller 2017). Future research should monitor the framing of industry images in advertising and marketing as a sign



Figure 20. Advertisement for fans and filters.

of the relationship to broader legal and political institutions, as well as the industry alignment or rejection of cultural norms and related inequalities.

Notes

1 This nickname was likely coined by law enforcement in the CAMP era of the 1980s and carries a symbolic connection to the Far East “Golden Triangle” of opium cultivation (Corva 2014). Some say it was not an accident that law enforcement chose a name with this connection that could conjure images of exotic warlords, lawlessness, and violence. While illicit drug markets are often associated with elevated rates of violence, passage of

state-level medical cannabis laws has been related to a reduction in violent crime rates (Morris et al. 2014).

2 During the late 1960s and early 1970s mostly white, middle class and well-educated “new settlers” (Corva 2014) returned to the idealized landscape of rural California to create a new life. Many of these back-to-landers had been involved in campus activism and were demonized by Governor Ronald Reagan and others for their association with counter-culture movements (Lee 2013).

3 In an effort to support cannabis eradication in Mexico, the United States in 1975 launched a program of spraying paraquat on cannabis and opium crops growing in the Sierra Madre. US government officials then issued public warnings about the health risks of consuming cannabis tainted with the herbicide (Anonymous 1978). These efforts created demand for domestic production (Lee 2013).

4 The price of weed varies greatly (Priceofweed.com 2017). The national average for an ounce of high quality weed is \$320.69. While folks looking for cannabis in California pay \$248.67, those in the nation’s capital pay \$599.10 per ounce.

5 This rate was computed by identifying the number of “grow stores” within a ten- mile radius of the Humboldt County seat, Eureka (13 businesses serving a population of 27,226 Eureka residences) and the Alameda County seat, Oakland (19 businesses serving 420,005 residents) using growstuff.com. A rate per 100,000 in the population was then computed from census data (United States Census 2017) for Eureka (48 per 100,000) and Oakland (5 per 100,000).

6 A “growhouse” is a residential dwelling partially or fully dedicated to indoor cannabis cultivation. Starting in 2008 there was substantial media attention to the “growhouse problem” as local officials repeated a dubious claim that there were 1,000 growhouses in Arcata, California (Reiterman and Bailey 2008).

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