

AARON GOODFELLOW, 'PHARMACEUTICAL INTIMACY: SEX, DEATH, AND METHAMPHETAMINE', *HOME CULTURES* VOL. 5 (NO. 3), 2008. BERG. ISSN: 1740-6315.

By Sophie Bennet

In 2008, Aaron Goodfellow challenged boundaries in sociology, anthropology and material culture studies with his article on sex, death and methamphetamine – an article which refuses to view drug (ab)use from a moral perspective. The result is a fascinating analysis of Mathew's life.¹ Mathew is a 24-year-old, white, HIV-positive crystal methamphetamine user, in a Baltimore rehabilitation institute on state parole, and receiving antiretroviral therapy (ART). In Mathew's own words, he is 'a public health threat number one, huh? (I'm) a gay crystal using, HIV positive convict' (quoted in Goodfellow 2008, 280). Through his interactions with Mathew, Goodfellow explores the anthropological issue of the contingency of specific substances and of personhood within a modern, urban context, on the edge of 'normative society'. The article supports the validity of Tilley's work on objectification (2006); people and things (in this case, substances) are indivisible. The author encourages us to view Mathew's situation not as an addiction, but as a partnership between Mathew and substances: Mathew often responds creatively to the substance's agency with his own agency. In this review, I will briefly discuss the thought-provoking aspects of Goodfellow's account, which will hopefully encourage you to read the article in full.

Goodfellow controversially encourages us to consider cocaine as a generative substance. Mathew is the son of crack cocaine; he traces his relation to his siblings through crack. They were 'cocaine babies' (quoted in Goodfellow 2008, 284), conceived through his mother's liaisons with crack dealers. The notion of kinship through cocaine, and not through a common father, exemplifies Gell's thesis (1998) that objects can mediate for people. Cocaine sustained Mathew's relationship with his mother; they smoked it together and he was her pimp while she prostituted herself to pay for the cocaine. It worked in other relationships, dividing Mathew from his sisters, and generating transient sexual relations, as he prostituted himself when his mother was too high to feed him. Regardless of the medical notions of addiction, drugs gradually became so ordinary in Mathew's life, that an alternative way of life was unthinkable; Mathew's acquisition of this mode of existence is in accordance with Bourdieu's habitus concept (1977). Although Mathew's life is non-normative, Goodfellow argues, interestingly, that the people-drug interface can constitute a moral realm. Goodfellow cites an instance when Mathew defended a friend's property as proof. Mathew's link to cocaine is non-negotiable, but it is unclear how we can evaluate this. Goodfellow's move away from discussing drugs simply in terms of pathological addiction is welcome, but his article lacks adequate consideration of the extent to which readers can accept Mathew's definition of himself as a cocaine baby.

In addition to cocaine, crystal methamphetamine is crucial to Mathew. When Mathew was about fourteen, his mother introduced him to methamphetamine and it became a lifelong 'companion' within his significant relationships. After a heterosexual relationship ended, Mathew began a partnership with Tom, a methamphetamine addict suffering from chronic severe depression. Mathew creatively developed a crystal mixture (methamphetamine with Robitussin and Tylenol PM) which maintained his bond with methamphetamine yet let him concentrate enough to care for Tom. Mathew's ability to generate a way of life through and with drugs suggests the cross-cultural relevance of Strathern's notion that substance in the Melanesian context has 'creative capacity' (1999, 52). The need to look after Tom motivated Mathew to complete a rehabilitation programme, and to try to protect Tom from HIV, despite Tom's wish for HIV to be close to Mathew. Mathew's ongoing negotiation with methamphetamine, especially within his relationship with Tom, is a constant learning process, perhaps substantiating Heidegger's claim that we must 'ever learn to dwell' (1978, 363). Carsten's awareness (2004), that in Melanesia substance generally

¹ Goodfellow's data was collected over two and a half years of contact with the Baltimore Treatment Services (pseudonym), including six months of contact with Mathew.

binds people to each other and to things, is pertinent to Mathew's methamphetamine use, with its associated material paraphernalia such as syringes.

Mathew's relation with methamphetamine is social, with an obvious bodily dimension. Love, erotic bliss and mortality all figure: 'I love it (meth) to death'; 'I love crystal because I like to fuck' (quoted in Goodfellow 2008, 280). Goodfellow's link between substance and sexual intercourse is familiar in anthropology; Carsten closely links food to sex (1995), whilst Meigs's classic paper (1976) compellingly sets out the intersection of substance, food, gender and procreation among the Papua New Guinean Hua. According to phenomenology, Mathew has an embodied cognition that differs from the cognition of those who do not use methamphetamine. Following Bourdieu (1977), Goodfellow sees the body as both a means of learning and a learned object; thus the experiential aspects of substances are necessary for their integration into Mathew's life. Near-death experiences and partial paralysis have not shaken Mathew's love for methamphetamine, which is typical for Baltimore users (c.f. Goodfellow 2008, 277). Mathew has engaged in anonymous gay unprotected-sex sessions, which provide intense pleasure, but these sessions are possibly the source of his HIV infection. This infection fundamentally changed his life-expectancy and prompted his chemical relationship with antiretroviral drugs. Mathew cares for his body ambivalently; he tries to live via ART yet dangerously continues to take methamphetamine.

In presenting his material, Goodfellow successfully uses the concept of 'assemblage' as a leitmotif to argue both that the individual case is a way to understanding a much larger arrangement of agents and actors, and that the individual's life cannot be understood without reference to these other entities. Strathern's study of Papua New Guinean Hagen male dancers, with regard to portraiture, illuminates the notion of assemblage (1999). A Hagen dancer's individuality is referenced by the assemblage of ornaments he wears, which objectifies his relations with others. As the dancers' personhood is relational, so too is Mathew's, which Goodfellow argues is composed of alliances between human and non-human agencies including families, individuals, the state, the prison reform services, the HIV virus and the drug industry. Goodfellow's assemblage concept lets him convey more than an 'individual case', in spite of his focus on Mathew. Goodfellow firmly avoids presenting Mathew as a mere victim of methamphetamine, whilst acknowledging that Mathew left school early, lacks professional qualifications and has served various prison sentences. Goodfellow, instead, argues powerfully that Mathew exercises agency and that racism within the US legal system was crucial in allowing Mathew's life to develop as it did (c.f. Goodfellow 2008, 294f). Goodfellow uses statistics to show that black and Hispanic drug users are much more likely to be arrested and convicted than their white counterparts under the controversial US Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 (*ibid.*). Goodfellow thus maintains that if Mathew had been a black crack addict, his life would have developed differently due to longer periods in jail.

Goodfellow's picture is, however, frustratingly incomplete, mainly due to the strict ethical regulations which prevented him from contacting Mathew's relatives. It would be interesting to have additional perspectives on Mathew's life. With further data, the subsidiary materialities involved, such as the prison, syringes and kitchens, could also be analysed. Goodfellow could have made links to anthropological studies of more (stereotypically, at least) mundane materialities, such as material worlds defined by food.

Overall, Goodfellow has provocatively rejected a typical winner-loser analysis of drug use. Instead, he argues convincingly that chemical alliances are not just about death but also creation; Mathew's bond with crystal methamphetamine and cocaine creates and sustains a specific way of life. Cocaine and crystal methamphetamine have more extreme social and bodily consequences than foods and other substances, which have traditionally dominated in anthropological analysis, and so Goodfellow's topic seems especially relevant. The greatest strengths of Goodfellow's article are the author's probing exploration of myriad aspects of Mathew's case and his fresh approach to a drug-related situation. Its weaknesses are its restricted range of data, which is beyond the author's control, and the lack of comparison to anthropological work on non-drug

related materialities. Goodfellow's interest in a comparison with other drugs is a call to arms that will hopefully be acted on.

© Sophie Bennet, 2009
B.A. European Social and Political Studies

References

- Bourdieu, Pierre, 'Structures and the Habitus,' *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977. 72-95.
- Carsten, Janet, 'Houses in Langkawi: Stable Structures or Mobile Homes,' *About the House*. Eds. Janet Carsten and Stephen Hugh-Jones. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. 84-104.
- Carsten, Janet. *After Kinship*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Gell, Alfred. *Art and Agency*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.
- Goodfellow, Aaron, 'Pharmaceutical Intimacy: Sex, Death, and Methamphetamine,' *Home Cultures* 5, 3 (2008): 271-300.
- Heidegger, Martin, 'Building, dwelling, thinking' *Basic Writings*. Ed. David Krell. London: Routledge, 1978. 347-363.
- Meigs, Anna, 'Male Pregnancy and the Reduction of Sexual Opposition in a New Guinea Highlands Society,' *Ethnology* 15, 4 (1976): 393-407.
- Strathern, Marilyn, 'Pre-figured Features' and 'The Aesthetics of Substance,' *Property, Substance and Effect: Anthropological Essays on Persons and Things*, London: The Athlone Press, 1999. 29-63.
- Tilley, Christopher, 'Objectification,' *Handbook of Material Culture*. Ed. Christopher Tilley et al. London: Sage, 2006. 60-73.